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# Memory, Time and Identity in the Novels of William Faulkner and Marcel Proust.

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MEMORY, TIME AND IDENTITY  
IN THE NOVELS OF  
WILLIAM FAULKNER AND MARCEL PROUST

A Dissertation

Submitted to the graduate faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of French and Italian

by  
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*for Denise*

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## Abstract

This dissertation is a comparative study of first person narrative in Marcel Proust's A la recherche du temps perdu (Remembrance of Things Past), and selected novels of William Faulkner, primarily those in which the character of Quentin Compson appears: The Sound and the Fury and Absalom, Absalom! This comparison is based upon the assumption that the attempts to represent the patterns of thought, memory, or consciousness in these novels is symptomatic of many twentieth-century novels, which dramatize an anxiety about the possibility of a solid ground for knowledge of the world or of the self. The language of these novels displays the instability or incoherence of human knowledge of self and world, thus destabilizing the notion of the individual as a coherent, self-knowing entity. Subjectivity is portrayed as the weaving of relations between signifiers. This implies a conception of being which is not that of a positive, substantial entity, but of relation. In chapter two, the role of language in the formation of memory, and the relationship between narrative and time is examined in Proust. In chapter three, the narrative structure of Faulkner's novels is examined from the perspective of Saussurian linguistics and through Continental criticism of Proust. In chapter four, the role of the proper name in the formation of a sense of social hierarchies is seen as central to the narrating hero's formation of a sense of self and other, and is one aspect of the role of sign systems in the formation of memories and personal identities. The role of art and representation in the formation of self-awareness leads to a consideration of the *mises en abyme*, or textual mirrors, in the novels, in chapter five. Finally, the question of identity and its expression in language gives rise to a consideration of the problems of reading and interpretation. These problems are also raised by the narratives under consideration. The activities of reading, interpretation, and literary studies are best understood, not as the pursuit of meaning, but as the production of meaning through the ongoing activity of recontextualization.

## Introduction: Identity Crises

This dissertation proposes to examine the attempt to represent individual thought or consciousness in works by Marcel Proust and William Faulkner, through an examination of Proust's first person narrator in A la recherche du temps perdu, and the characters who narrate two of Faulkner's most canonical novels, most notably the figure of Quentin Compson, whose point of view is one of the central features of The Sound and the Fury and Absalom, Absalom! The attempt to represent thought or memory in Faulkner's work is symptomatic of many twentieth-century novelists since the time of Proust. In novels by authors such as Marcel Proust, William Faulkner, James Joyce or Samuel Beckett, the literary production of the twentieth century has reflected an anxiety about the possibility for a solid ground for knowledge of the world and of the self. In these narratives, the unity and stability of human personality and identity are ultimately put into question, through the attempt to imitate the structure of thought in language. The language of these novels quite often display the instability or incoherence of human knowledge of self and world, thus destabilizing the notion of the individual as a coherent, self-knowing entity. The attempt to represent subjectivity in various forms of first-person narrative demonstrates the constitutive role of language and representation, of the exterior, the "Other," as expressed in Rimbaud's famous statement, "Je est un autre". This can be seen particularly in the fragmentation and unreliability of narrative voice. Modern novelistic practice disrupts traditional narrative forms from within by a language which continually calls into question its own premises.

## Self and Nation

The end of the nineteenth century saw the culmination of nationalist aspirations in newly formed governmental entities such as Italy or Germany. This was also a period in which the academic study of national "literatures" was first institutionalized. The rise of the nation state and the study of national literatures are both symptoms of a need to impose new structures which would serve to legitimize and reassure people in their right to exist

and their difference from other groups of people. It is no simple coincidence that the same period saw intensive research into the “dark side” of the human psyche. The identity of an individual and the identity of a culture or nation are bound up in a specular relationship based on the relationship of self and other, each defined in relation to the other. This relation is embodied within the individual in the relationship between consciousness and the “unconscious.” All over Europe, researchers were studying mental aberrations, and forming theories about the nature of human consciousness, with the goal of establishing a framework for understanding personality. The goal of all this research was to establish a solid basis for an answer to the question of identity, to find the essence, core or kernel of being. The technical, political and economical changes in the West seemed to call into question previous systems of identification. The research into psychology and the violent consolidation of the nation state are symptoms of an identity crisis, a doubt about the possibility of a guarantee that we are born and remain unique individuals.

It is perhaps this anxiety about the integrity of the self that is at the root of the violence to be seen in the world today. Individuals and groups of people everywhere feel themselves threatened with dispersal or assimilation, with the loss of their specificity as individuals or as particular groups. The violence with which groups of people defend what they perceive as their inherent right to a certain territory belies the anxiety that the intermingling of cultures, religions or ethnic groups may lead to a situation of dilution in which difference disappears.

This situation arose in part because of a crumbling of faith in religious and political institutions which were previously seen as monolithic, stable structures allowing individuals to situate themselves in human society, in space, and in time. The concern with representing human thought and consciousness in fiction is concurrent with this period in which the bases of human thought about the world and the self were in question.

### Being and Time

Western literature and philosophy have long been preoccupied by the relationship of the concepts of being and time. The doubt about the stability and subsistence of human



existence has been accompanied by a reconsideration of the concept of time. In Études sur le temps humain, Georges Poulet claims that the Christian in Medieval Europe had quite a different conception of time and of his existence in time from that of modern man. The feeling of existence in the present, he says, did not precede the sense of his own duration: “Il ne se découvrait pas d’abord dans le moment présent, pour se concevoir ensuite existant dans le temps. Bien au contraire se sentir exister, c’était pour lui se sentir être, et se sentir être, c’était se sentir non pas changer, non pas devenir, non pas se succéder à soi-même, mais se sentir subsister [. . .] Aussi n’est-ce pas en termes d’instantants indépendants et successifs que se concevait la relation des créatures au Créateur.” “He did not first discover himself in the present moment in order to then conceive of himself existing in time. On the contrary, the sense of existence was the sense of being, and to feel oneself as being was not to feel oneself changing, becoming or succeeding oneself in time, it was rather to have a sense of permanence [. . .] Nor was it in terms of independent successive instants that the relationship of creatures to the creator was conceived.” The technological achievements of modern scientific practice have accelerated the pace of life in the industrialized West, with the effect of increasing the importance of the moment, focusing attention on time as a succession of instants.

But the faith in the permanence and stability of human existence that the Medieval Christian felt, was also accompanied by what Poulet calls a sense of the “profound lack of permanence” which characterizes human existence. “Le chrétien du moyen âge [. . .] s’il sentait sa propre permanence, il se trouvait contraint de sentir au même titre son manque profond de permanence. Il se sentait à la fois, contradictoirement, un être permanent et un être temporel [. . .] qui ne change jamais et [. . .] qui change toujours.”<sup>1</sup> “While he had a sense of his own permanence, the Christian of the Middle Ages had also to feel his profound lack of permanence. He felt himself at once, and in contradiction, a permanent being and a temporal being. [. . .] who never changes [. . .] and who changes continually.” The sense of the mutability of earthly existence was counterbalanced by a belief in a

<sup>1</sup> Georges Poulet, Études sur le temps humain, (Paris: Plon, 1949) i, iii. (my translation).

spiritual time, oriented toward spiritual perfection, a faith in the linear nature of time, the progress of which brought the Christian closer to God.

Martin Heidegger has called one of the “essential phenomena” of the modern age: “the loss of the gods” or “a situation of indecision regarding God and the gods.”<sup>2</sup> The increasing secularization of Western society, and the acceleration of cross-cultural exchanges with non-western traditions have also contributed to this tendency. One aspect of this “loss of the gods” is the weakening of the sense of duration and subsistence, and of the conception of time as a linear progression.

The historical moment at which this resistance was first manifested, the starting point for what is called the “modern” age is open to endless debate.<sup>3</sup> Many historians point to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when a renewed interest in ancient Latin and Greek texts, in skeptic philosophies, brought about an increasing sense of the insignificance of man in the universe and cast doubt on the sense of the permanence of being. René Descartes’ attempts to establish a firm basis for human knowledge was in part a response to this skepticism and uncertainty.<sup>4</sup> His Discours de la méthode marked the emergence of modern science, based in the subject as self-presence, effectively the new point of reference. The Discours established a “world view:” Henceforth the world became the object of a scientific gaze. The eye of the scientist projects a ground plan of the world, upon which knowledge can be secured.<sup>5</sup> The ultimate point of reference for scientific knowledge is the individual, the speaking subject, the “I” of Descartes’ “I think therefore I am.” It is this self-knowing, autonomous subject who *sees* the world and is able to represent what he sees in a

<sup>2</sup> The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays, trans. William Lovitt. (New York: Garland, 1977) 117.

<sup>3</sup> As Paul De Man has suggested, the terms “modern,” and “postmodern” belong to a positivist conception of time as progress: “The notion of modernity is already very dubious: the notion of postmodernity becomes a parody of the notion of modernity [. . .] it strikes me as a very unmodern, a very old-fashioned, conservative concept of history, where history is seen as a succession” Paul de Man, The Resistance to Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) 120.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the influence of the Greek skeptics on Descartes, see Richard H. Popkin. The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Descartes. (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1960).

<sup>5</sup> Heidegger, 117.

transparent, universal language. Cartesian science established the belief in humanity's ability to fully explain the world.

Through Descartes, the "man of science" becomes the model for the West's conception of selfhood, of being self-knowledge, wholeness or presence.<sup>6</sup> The faith in human reason and the power of the human mind in seventeenth century Europe, and the subsequent technological and scientific explosion of the next two centuries was made possible by the supposition that humans were capable of communicating clear, rational thought in a transparent language.

Jacques Derrida has argued that in Western philosophy identity, being, and meaning are ultimately guaranteed by reference to the *logos*, the word of God, which preceded, and called into being the world. In this view, the logos functions not only as origin, but as a "transcendental" signifier, linking human language to the world of essences or preconceived ideas (on the level of the signified, in Saussurian parlance), and guaranteeing the presence of meaning to language. The Platonic world of essence belief in this world of essences is a religious one, the equivalent of the of ideas. The logos is the link between incarnation and the transcendental, the spirit in the letter. It is the "word made flesh."

The *crisis* spoken of here is the realization of the *anti logical* function of language, of opacity, its resistance to meaning. The resistance of meaning is correlative to the problem of identity. This crisis of being is thus also a crisis of meaning, particularly about the meaning of such terms as *consciousness*, *identity*, and *being*. In his introduction to Being and Time, Heidegger has pointed out that being is "the most universal and the emptiest concept. As such it resists every attempt at definition."<sup>7</sup> To define is to identify. That which is undefinable is unknowable, including man. The ability to accurately define a concept presupposes that it is possible to establish absolute frame of reference and criteria with which to measure its accuracy. It ignores the contingency of meaning, its dependence on

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre's term for this concept is that of "being in itself" "l'être en soi."

<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger Basic Writings. (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) 41.

conventions—that is to say, the consensus of a majority of designated experts, such as in an academic setting, where decisions of what is acceptable and unacceptable are made by peers, whose selection is dependent on committees. Thus the possibility of dissension and revision is built into such a system. The desire to establish absolutes is antithetical to such a structure.

In the nineteenth century, science turned its attention to the unreason which inhabits all human thought. One name eventually given, by psychoanalytical theory, to this unreason, was that of the “unconscious,” that “other” which inhabits the self, and which casts doubt on the stability and singularity of human thought and identity. In their positing of a split between conscious and unconscious processes, these theories effectively called into question the Cartesian model of subjectivity, as that of a self-knowing, unique, rational consciousness, while simultaneously asserting the power of scientific thought to unravel the mystery of the unconscious.

In the modern world, the meaning of being and the being of meaning, as essence, is threatened by relativistic forces. One of the most important events of the twentieth century was the publication of Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity. But even Einstein had his totalitarian dream in his search for a “unified field theory.” Nevertheless the importance of relativity is not limited to the “hard” science of physics. The explosion in popularity of the internet is another example of the increased speed with which people from different cultures and different regions can communicate to each other. The play of voices and the ability to create an alter-ego in cyberspace, illustrate and accelerate what has always already been the case: that that phenomenon which we refer to as personality, the essence of personal identity itself, is the weaving of a text, the tracing of a relation in time and among shifting forces.

This ontological crisis also been reflected in fiction, particularly in the novel, in the various techniques by which writers from diverse backgrounds and cultures attempt to represent consciousness, particularly through a first person narrator. It could be argued that

the modern novel is, in a very large measure, a first-person novel.<sup>8</sup> Where nineteenth-century realist narrative attempted to paint a generalized, *objective*, portrait of the world, as seen from the exterior, by an omniscient narrator, the twentieth-century novel has attempted to represent the “inner life” of consciousness, to portray the world from the limited, fallible point of view of a particular individual. In this it shares the realist aspiration to *represent* reality. The main difference which marks twentieth-century novels is that the world is no longer approached as an object to be known, but as a creation of the mind. The reliance on the unreliable first-person narrator emphasizes the subjective nature of reality. The integrity of that subject is, however, problematized by the inconsistency and unreliability of human thought. Ultimately, the very bases of human knowledge and judgment are called into question. This explains the instability of the narrative voice, as the modern novel ineluctably problematizes the status of its own narrative point of view.

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<sup>8</sup> This is the thesis of Jean Rousset à propos the French modern novel: “Notre roman moderne, comme celui du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, est dans une très large mesure un roman de la première personne.” “Our modern novel, like that of the eighteenth century is, in a very large measure a first person novel.” The instability of the pronoun “I” in many novels, says Rousset, betrays the uncertainty of the speaking subject about his own integrity: “Le je se met en crise, en même temps que l’unité et la stabilité de la personne sont mises en question.” “The I undergoes a crisis at the moment that the unity and the stability of the person are questioned.” Narcisse Romancier: essai sur la première personne dans le roman. (Paris: J. Corti, 1973) 9, 36. My translation. It is one of my premises that this can be said of many modern novelists.

## Chapter 1: An Exhausted Subject? The Postage Stamp and the Cup of Tea

There has been so much written about these two authors that the topics might seem to have already been so thoroughly “covered,” so exhausted, that there can be little intelligent left to say. What purpose could be served by adding to the enormous critical literature which each of these authors has inspired? These are the inevitable questions which plague anyone who proposes to study texts such as those I have chosen, or more generally, *any* of the literary works which belong to what is often referred to as the “canon” of Western Literature. This is all the more true for such white male authors as Proust and Faulkner. The choice to study either of these authors would have seemed natural two or three decades ago, but is hardly as innocent as it once may have seemed.

A consideration of the notion of the “exhaustibility” of a given topic, or even of the potential exhaustion of writing itself would not be entirely inappropriate., since Faulkner stated that a major turning point in his writing career was the realization that he would never be able to exhaust the possibilities for writing about the world he imagined in Yoknapatawpha county: “Beginning with Sartoris I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it.”<sup>7</sup>

The postage stamp as an image of an arbitrarily limited, almost insignificant space is meant to render all the more miraculous the proliferation of narrative devoted to it. The self-containment of the stamp may, however, be a misleading metaphor for Faulkner’s literary cosmos. Yoknapatawpha county, though perhaps small, is by no means as insignificant as Faulkner’s pseudo-attempt at self-effacement may have meant to suggest. With only the most tenuous of links to the outside—two roads, one heading north-south and the other heading east-west, a rail-line and a river, Jefferson is open to influences from Memphis, New Orleans, New York, Haiti and even Paris. Indeed, as at least one critic has

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<sup>7</sup> Faulkner’s remark is taken from an interview with Jean Stein which was originally published in *The Paris Review* in the Spring of 1956, republished in *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner 1926-1962*, Ed. James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate. 1968. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980) 255. All further references to this volume will be noted parenthetically with the abbreviation LG.

attempted to suggest, it seems as though, in order to make up for his novel's lack of narrative closure, Faulkner had to resort to time lines, encyclopedia-style character lists, and cartography in order to constitute his fictional universe as a complete, self-contained cosmos.<sup>10</sup>

Proust, too, limits the physical setting in which his characters evolve: a small village in the French countryside, a Normandy beach resort, and the exclusive worlds of the aristocracy and Parisian society. And as with the Yoknapatawpha saga, Proust's novel is recognized as being the work of a lifetime, an effort which only culminated in the fourteen year period of intense writing which left him physically exhausted. A la recherche du temps perdu is a work which began as a polemical essay, mutated into a three volume novel and then ballooned into the eight volume, 3000 page opus we know today. Yet Proust also claimed to have written the beginning and the end at the same time, so that the bulk of the novel, roughly from A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs to Albertine disparue, was "filled in" afterwards. It is often understood that Proust did this because of his poor health, not knowing whether he would live long enough to complete his work. It is equally probable that, unsure of whether he would be able to say all he wanted to (or perhaps realizing it was impossible) he had to posit an end-point, in order to know not only where he was headed, but that he would indeed arrive there at all.

If Proust felt an urgent need to bring his work to completion, Faulkner may have felt an opposing sense of urgency, in his financial obligations, to sustain his literary production. The very names Faulkner and Proust are associated by many with loquacity, with interminable syntax or a long-winded oratorical style—in short with their very inability to *conclude*.<sup>11</sup> This very association can serve to close off the play of signification at work in

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<sup>10</sup> In his Bakhtinian reading, Philip M. Weinstein suggests that the map and chronology Faulkner added to later editions of Absalom, Absalom! while seemingly seeking to contain the novel, reveal, in their conflicting and contradictory claims, "the unmastered dialogic restlessness of the text." Faulkner's Subject: A Cosmos No One Owns. Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 97.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen M. Ross links Absalom, Absalom! to the tradition of southern oratory. According to Ross, "for the colloquial orator there can be no closure [. . .], for there is no end to what he has to say." The various

their novels. It is nevertheless an open question as to what extent the “subject” of these novels is identifiable (and I am playing, for the moment, on the very ambiguity of the term subject: the ambiguity which reigns whenever we speak of subjects, either the topic of a work or what we commonly tend to confuse with the terms individual or person). The works of these two authors are excellent examples of the “inflation” of the signifier.

What links the works of Faulkner and Proust more than anything is their use of narrative to illustrate, not so much defined characters, as the impossibility of arriving at any definitive description of character. They mobilize the workings of language, memory and perception to dramatize how consciousness continually (de)constructs itself in language. Both works bear witness to a crisis of identity which manifests itself in narrative, in the figure of narrating subjects, whether they be Proust’s “je,” the “psychic voices” of Benjy and Quentin in The Sound and the Fury, or the various storytellers in Absalom, Absalom!. In both novels, as they are usually understood, idiosyncratic narrative style is meant to represent the workings of an individual human consciousness, but these novels simultaneously challenge the very possibility of representation, and problematize identity as the stable, self-similar presence of consciousness to itself. It might equally be argued that the Proust’s work is a massively reiterated attempt to answer the question: “Who and where am I?” or that the narrators in Absalom, in attempting to answer the question “Who was Thomas Sutpen?” are driven inexorably back to the question “Who wants to know?” The storyteller is identified by the story he is telling, by the way he tells it; consciousness is no longer linked to an individual essence, but to the slipperiness of language.

#### Linguistics and the Subject

The field of modern linguistics, as a study of the production of meaning in language was another product of this period of crisis which, if anything, has intensified at the end of the twentieth century. These conflicts and crises are symptoms of an

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narrators of the novel display “oratory’s essential discursive movement toward ever greater amplification.” “Oratory and the dialogical in Absalom, Absalom!” in Intertextuality in Faulkner, eds. Michel Gresset and Noel Polk (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985) 73 -127. See also Fiction’s Inexhaustible Voice.



epistemological crisis, a crisis about the nature of human knowledge. Modern epistemology is in many ways based on linguistics, and especially that form of structural linguistics which begins with Saussure's Cours de linguistique générale. Saussure attempted to show how meaning is not inherent in the word itself nor does it derive directly from a word's historical, etymological source, but is a function of that word's position within a *system* which is complete and self-sufficient at any given moment. That place is only defined by its *difference* from all the other elements in the system: "In language there are only differences *without positive terms*."<sup>12</sup>

Jacques Lacan has pointed out that language as a system exists before the individual speaking subject. The subject needs language in order to constitute him or her self as subject, but language does not need any particular individual in order to be perpetuated as a system: "language and its structure exist prior to the moment at which each subject at a certain point in his mental development makes his entry into it."<sup>13</sup> The subject is "born into" a language, and his or her entry into the symbolic order of human society is equated with the entry into language, which begins before birth with the imposition of a proper name. The imposition of a name marks the entry of the child into the linguistic economy and the symbolic order.

The writer's paradox is then to construct an individual subjectivity using the impersonal material of the linguistic system. More often than not this has meant altering the language, using it in unaccustomed ways in order to suggest the monstrous, inexpressible, inassimilable nature of the self in society. This is the solution proposed by Proust's narrator in Le temps retrouvé: The uniqueness of a truly great work of art expresses the "world" seen only by the particular artist who created it: "Par l'art seulement nous pouvons sortir de nous, savoir ce que voit un autre de cet univers qui n'est pas le

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<sup>12</sup> "[. . .] dans la langue il n'y a que des différences *sans termes positifs*." "[. . .] in language there are only differences *without positive terms*." Ferdinand de Saussure. Cours de linguistique générale. Paris: Payot, 1981 (1966).

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Lacan. "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud." Écrits: A Selection. Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977) 146-177. p. 148.

même que le nôtre et dont les paysages nous seraient restés aussi inconnus que ceux qu'il peut y avoir dans la lune" (TR 202) "Through are alone we are able to emerge from ourselves, to know what another person sees of a universe which is not the same as our own and of which, without art, the landscapes would remain as unknown to us as those that may exist in the moon" (III: 932). Art, says Proust is our only "true" life. A great work of art expresses that unique experience of the world, that difference from others which is usually hidden by the conventions and habits of everyday life. Proust's affirmation of the power of art is mitigated, though, by the premise of a radical dichotomy between the life of the artist himself and his work. This is exemplified by the figures of Vinteuil and Bergotte in the Recherche. The question of art and originality is assimilable to the linguistic model of speech and language—the former being a particular manifestation of the latter. The unique work of art is a particular arrangement of elements which are common to a specific medium: paint and canvas in the case of painting, rhythm and timbre in the case of music, words on a page in the case of literature.

The problem with structuralist formulations of language may, however, be their insistence on the "system" as something frozen and complete. It almost seems a positive entity, a being in itself. It might be more useful in the context of the works here considered to think of this system not as a fixed entity, but as an ongoing process. Language as a system does not precede its particular manifestation in speech or writing. It is rather a set of generalized rules and common elements abstracted from the particular.

To define a word requires more words, which in turn must themselves be defined. Meaning cannot exist apart from a context. This process is effectively infinite. There can be no absolute value upon which it can come to rest, whether it be considered as the origin, the logos or the system. Derrida describes this infinite process in these terms:

«Signifiant du signifiant» décrit [. . .] le mouvement du langage: dans son origine, certes, mais on pressent déjà qu'une origine dont la structure s'épelle ainsi—signifiant de signifiant—s'empporte et s'efface elle-même dans sa propre production. Le signifié y fonctionne toujours déjà comme un signifiant. La secondarité qu'on croyait pouvoir réserver à l'écriture affecte tout signifié en général, l'affecte toujours déjà, c'est à dire d'*entrée de jeu*.

Signifier of a signifier describes the movement of language in its origins, certainly, but one can already sense that an origin whose structure is thus designated—the signifier of a signifier—is carried away and erases itself in its very production. The signified always already functions as a signifier. The secondarity that was thought to be reserved for writing affects all signifieds; it always already affects them, as soon as the game begins.<sup>14</sup>

This movement of language implies that there can be no final word to close off the process of identification. The absence of an absolute basis or center, a sort of “gold standard” for meaning to be guaranteed in language, what Derrida terms the *logos*, implies what he refers to as a kind of absolute *inflation*: “Cette inflation du signe «langage» est l’inflation du signe lui-même, l’inflation absolue, l’inflation elle-même,” “This inflation of the sign ‘language’ is the inflation of the sign itself, absolute inflation, inflation itself” (15).

This potentially infinite process of linguistic identification, of naming, can appear to be fixed, (in dictionaries, encyclopedia entries or legal records). Yet just as the “closed” system of language is set in motion by the flux of time, personal identity, dependent on contexts, necessarily changes when those contexts change. Thus in Proust, the profound transformation of French society caused by the Dreyfus affair changes, along with social “values,” the very identities of the people involved. Proust refers to this phenomenon as a “social kaleidoscope.” It is this kaleidoscope, as an image of the perpetual reconfiguration of elements in the social fabric, which also suggests the inexhaustible nature of reading, and allows us to approach these novels from new perspectives, for as the values and assumptions of culture change, the ways we understand and interpret works of art and literature change as well.

### The Subject of the Novel

Gerard Genette suggests that it is possible to summarize the plot of A la Recherche du temps perdu in the simple sentence: “Marcel becomes a writer,” but this would be a gross reduction, worthy of Monty-Python’s All-England Summarize Proust Contest.<sup>15</sup> It

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967) 16 (my translation).

<sup>15</sup> Genette suggests that it is possible to treat Proust’s novel, or any narrative, as “the development, monstrous as you like, given to a verbal locution, in the grammatical sense of the term: the expansion of a verb. *I’m*

remains very difficult to provide a simple answer to the questions “What is the work about?” What is its “point”? The attempt to answer these questions has occupied critics for nearly a century. More often than not, the answers depend more on the particular political or critical predispositions of the reader than on any kind of objective measure. Any such attempt must interrogate the basis of its own reading. Indeed, Proust’s narrator suggests that this is all one can do:

En réalité, chaque lecteur est quand il lit le propre lecteur de soi-même. L’ouvrage de l’écrivain n’est qu’une espèce d’instrument optique qu’il offre au lecteur afin de lui permettre de discerner ce que sans ce livre il n’eût peut-être pas vu en soi-même. La reconnaissance en soi-même, par le lecteur, de ce que dit le livre, est la preuve de la vérité de celui-ci, et vice versa, au moins dans une certaine mesure, la différence entre les deux textes pouvant être souvent imputée non à l’auteur mais au lecteur. [. . .] le lecteur a besoin de lire d’une certaine façon pour bien lire; l’auteur n’a pas à s’en offenser, mais au contraire à laisser la plus grande liberté au lecteur en lui disant: «Regardez vous-même si vous voyez mieux avec ce verre-ci, avec celui-là, avec cet autre»<sup>16</sup> (TR 217-18)

In reality every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self. The writer’s work is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have perceived in himself. And the recognition by the reader in his own self of what the book says is the proof of its veracity, the contrary also being true, at least to a certain extent, for the difference between the two texts may sometimes be imputed less to the author than to the reader. [. . .] In order to read with understanding many readers require to read in their own particular fashion, and the author must not be indignant at this; on the contrary, he must leave the reader all possible liberty, saying to him: “Look

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walking, *Pierre has arrived*, are [. . .] minimal forms of narratives. On the other hand, the *Odyssey* or the *Remembrance* merely amplify (in the rhetorical sense of the term) enunciations such as *Ulysses returns to Ithaca*, or *Marcel becomes a writer*.” [“Puisque tout récit—fût-il aussi étendu et aussi complexe que la *Recherche du temps perdu*—est une production linguistique assumant la relation d’un ou plusieurs événement(s), il est peut-être légitime de le traiter comme le développement, aussi monstrueux qu’on voudra, donné à une forme *verbale*, au sens grammatical du terme: l’expansion d’un verbe. *Je marche*, *Pierre est venu*, sont pour moi des formes minimales de récit, et inversement l’*Odysée* ou la *Recherche* ne font d’une certaine manière qu’amplifier (au sens rhétorique) des énoncés tels qu’*Ulysse rentre à Ithaque* ou *Marcel devient écrivain*.”] Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972) 75. All further references to this text will be given parenthetically.

<sup>16</sup> Marcel Proust, *A la Recherche du temps perdu* 8 vols. (Paris: Folio [Gallimard], 1987 - 1990). For convenience, all references to this novel will be to this edition, and will be noted parenthetically, with the following abbreviations to indicate specific volumes: S, *Du côté de chez Swann*; JF, *A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*; CGI, CGII, *Le côté de Guermantes* (I and II); SG, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*; P, *La prisonnière*; AD, *Albertine disparue*; and TR, *Le temps retrouvé*. All English translations of Proust’s novel are from *Remembrance of Things Past*. Trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. 3 vols. New York: Random House, 1981, and will be noted parenthetically with volume and page numbers.

for yourself, and try whether you see best with this lens or that one or this other one" (III: 949)

Proust's text here suggests a model of reading and interpretation in which the work of art does not maintain an independent self-contained life. It is dependent upon the recognition or mis-recognition of the reader, understood not simply as one who consumes the text, accepting or rejecting it as a complete, self-contained package. Proust acknowledges that the reader is obliged to approach texts only with his experience and knowledge of language and culture, history and science, that is to say with *other texts*. As Barthes suggests: "Ce «moi» qui s'approche du texte est déjà lui-même une pluralité d'autres textes." "This 'self' which approaches the text is already itself a plurality of other texts."<sup>17</sup> To approach an understanding of the problem of narrative identity as represented in Proust and Faulkner, it helps to begin with the linguistic bases of subjectivity itself.

The use in psychology of the term "subject" demonstrates that field's intimate dependence on linguistic considerations. For the term subject, strictly speaking, must refer to the grammatical subject, and only by extension to the speaking (or writing) subject. The illusion of voice in narrative emerges from the use of the pronoun "I," which, as Emile Benveniste points out, presupposes a communicative linguistic model based upon a relationship between "I" and "you." These pronouns are referred to as "shifters," since they continually shift referents in the context of a conversation. The pronoun "je" refers to "l'individu qui énonce la présente instance de discours contenant l'instance linguistique je," "the individual uttering the present instance of speech containing the linguistic element "I."<sup>18</sup> The shifter's critical dependence upon context is also a characteristic of human personality and identity.

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<sup>17</sup> "La subjectivité est une image pleine, dont on suppose que j'encombre le texte, mais dont la plénitude, truquée, n'est que le sillage de tous les codes qui me font, en sorte que ma subjectivité a la généralité même des stéréotypes. L'objectivité est un remplissage du même ordre: c'est un système imaginaire comme les autres[. . . une image qui sert à me faire nommer avantageusement, à me faire connaître, à me méconnaître." Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970) 16 - 17. (my translation). All further references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>18</sup> Emile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966) 252.

The term voice suggests a presence, the source of the utterance, but the illusion of voice is a phenomenon which is produced, and is therefore reproducible in language. It is possible to assume the voice of another. Utterances are always susceptible to repetition through quotation. The use of quotation marks is a convention meant to affirm presence, to guarantee the intention of the source of the enunciation, the person, in their absence. The materiality of language, its inherent anonymity, its complete otherness with reference to the individual, must be compensated by a whole series of contextual considerations which serve to make language cohere with its "producer," while simultaneously holding them apart. It is not merely that speakers are to be responsible for their enunciations: the rules which govern the use and ownership of certain utterances (the system of authorship, of signatures, of ritual, as Pierce and Derrida have shown, serve to produce "successful" speech acts), create the illusion that subjects produce language, but the opposite is equally true. What writers have explored in twentieth-century literature is how language produces subjects. From these two hypotheses it does not take long to conclude that language produces language. The self-perpetuating mechanics of language seems indifferent to the presence or absence of individual human beings.

The problematizing of human identity in these novels points to what Katherine Hayles refers to, in her discussions of "postmodern" epistemology, as the "posthuman," evoking the mechanical production of cultural artifacts through "feedback loops"

When the essential components of human experience are denatured, they are not merely revealed as constructions. The human subject who stands as the putative source of experience is also deconstructed and then reconstructed in ways that fundamentally alter what it means to be human. The postmodern anticipates and implies the posthuman.<sup>19</sup>

In such a formulation the human subject becomes little more than a hypothesis, a figure of language, constituted only as a function of *text* or *discourse*. The Cartesian subject as self-knowledge and plenitude has disappeared as the anchor or origin of subjectivity, which can be thought of as the locus of the intersection of various, sometimes conflicting, voices.

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<sup>19</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, Chaos Bound (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) 266.

In narrative, the narrating subject might best be thought of in the same terms that Roland Barthes uses to describe the person, as a construction, a figure, the intersection of an impersonal network of signifiers or “a collection of traits” and their associated connotations, with a proper name, or, in the case of a first person narrator, the personal pronoun “I.”<sup>20</sup> The first-person narrators of many twentieth-century novels often do not function as substantial entities. They cease to be readable as coherent subjects, rather becoming anonymous, impossible empty signifiers, such as the narrator of Samuel Beckett’s Molloy. Beckett has simply taken the implications of Proustian discourse and gone further than anyone else (including perhaps Proust himself) in demonstrating the nothingness of human expression. This tendency can be traced in much of twentieth century fiction, including the work of William Faulkner.

### The Subject of Psychoanalysis

Freudian psychoanalysis is a narrative-based practice. It borrows many of its exemplary figures and terms from literature with the aim is of reconstituting a certain narrative of the patient’s life. Psychoanalysis can be thought of as the composition of an appropriate narrative of the self, an explanation of personality identity according to what Peter Brooks has called Freud’s “masterplot.” This masterplot, driven by desire toward the release of tension, demands the shortest possible route, one obeying a strict logico-temporal development. Using Roland Barthes’s description of the “readerly” text in S/Z, Brooks points out that meaning in the classical, or readerly text, “resides in full predication, completion of the codes in a ‘plenitude’ of signification.”<sup>21</sup> This point of culmination of traditional narrative is embodied in the deathbed scene so frequent in nineteenth century novels: “all such scenes offer the promise of a significant retrospect, a summing-up, the coming to completion of a fully predicated, and readable, sentence.” In this interpretation,

<sup>20</sup> Roland Barthes. S/Z (Paris: Seuil, 1970) 101. All further references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>21</sup> “Beyond the Pleasure Principle constitutes Freud’s own masterplot, the essay where he lays out most fully a total scheme of how life proceeds from beginning to end. [. . .] This inescapable middle is suggestive of the demonic: repetition and return are perverse and difficult, interrupting simple movement forward.” Peter Brooks. “Freud’s Masterplot,” Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative (New York: Knopf, 1984) 96, 100. All further references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

everything that delays or otherwise complicates or prolongs this progression is “deviant.” If this is the case, then it should come as no surprise that texts such as these provoke reactions of impatience or frustration on the part of many readers.

### Narrative as Actions

The concept of narrative implies the relation of a series of *actions* rather than *description*. This conception of narrative may have come to us through the sixteenth century’s transposition of the classical unities of time, place and action from the theater to the novel. Though in practice authors have always produced works which stray from this ideal, such as Sterne’s Tristram Shandy or Diderot’s Jacques le fataliste, the works which comprise the canon of seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century literature have invariably obeyed this injunction: Rabelais, Cervantes, and Diderot were scorned by readers of “serious” literature, as were “minor” forms such as the epistolary novel. This model of good narrative is based upon a conception of history as chronology, as a linear progression in time.

The movement of time referred to as chronological is a linear movement in which time has only one dimension and one direction. In this view, the world has a beginning, a middle and an end. This has been the West’s conception of time since *Genesis*. Alphabetic writing is linear, since it cannot be taken in visually all at once the way a painting can. The linearity of narrative reinforces this conception of time, which has long dominated forms of European narrative, culminating in the novel as most people think of it, which reached its pinnacle of popularity in the nineteenth century, with realist writers such as Dickens and Balzac, Tolstoi and Zola. Taken this way, narrative implies a communicative act in which an *action* is communicated. In a novel there are often innumerable actions recounted.

Traditional realist fiction takes as its paradigm a narrative in which actions are recounted from beginning to end, in chronological order; the time of the narrative follows, as closely as is possible, the chronological evolution of the plot. What characterizes the



modernity of Faulkner and Proust is the ways in which their novels undo this linearity in an attempt to imitate the constant accumulation and reinvention of memory.

For the French reader, the A la Recherche du temps perdu would be an excellent example of such a technique, as it undoes, on almost every page, the linearity which we commonly associate with time. Proust did more than any other to dispel the long held assumption that stories are to be told from *beginning* to end. So many different combinations are used, that Genette has employed Proust's novel to illustrate a kind of encyclopedia of narrative techniques. His analyses of these techniques can be useful for reading Faulkner's novel. Genette begins by distinguishing between "story" and "narrative" ("histoire" and "récit")—the latter being the instance, or act of storytelling, and the former the story that is told. The "story" here can also be thought of as "plot." The story must be abstracted from the narrative in order for inconsistencies between them to be perceived. A story is essentially to be defined as a series of *actions* or *events* which are linked together in a narrative, by causality (logic), or chronology. There are, then, at least two layers of temporality which can be discussed in reference to a narrative: there is the *story time*—the chronology or the *plot*, and the *narrative* or *textual* time—which refers, not to time, but to the amount of text it takes to tell the story, the space that the text occupies on the page.

The distinction between narrative and plot allows Genette to identify several possible variations on this discrepancy. An exact correlation between these two temporal orders is seldom achieved, though the best example of what such correlation might look like might be the *scene* which often consists of dialogue. Genette distinguishes several variations on this basic paradigm, which he calls *anachronies*, or discordances between these two temporal orders. When the amount of text devoted to the story decreases, the actions seem to accelerate. Years of events can be summarized in a single sentence. The *ellipse* he defines as an "infinite speed" where no text is devoted to a period of time. The text effectively "skips forward," as if nothing significant had happened in the intervening time. Conversely, when the amount of text devoted to specific events increases, the story seems to

slow down. The *descriptive pause* is a portion of text which does not relate any action whatsoever. The criticisms that early readers had for Proust's novel often had to do with the number of pages he devoted to descriptions or what seemed to be insignificant actions, such as the narrator's difficulty going to sleep in "Ouverture."

Such passages are frequent in A la recherche, yet, as Gilles Deleuze points out, the story *does indeed* advance. This is what he insists upon when he states that the novel is "not turned toward the past, but toward the future and the progress of the narrator's 'apprenticeship.'" <sup>22</sup> As Coindreau notes, "Proust [. . .] nourished more on classical disciplines, accepts certain conventional restraints. Chronology, for example, inspires in him a respect that is unknown to Faulkner." <sup>23</sup> Such a judgment, is often useful in giving a first-time reader a sense of what the text is doing, but it is also an oversimplification, for the text moves continually into the past and into the future. <sup>24</sup>

Proust's novel obeys a somewhat chronological progression, insofar as the hero can be seen to "grow up." <sup>25</sup> He is older in the latter volumes, but the steady progress of his development is not clearly indicated. There are no details given, for example, about his formal education. Instead, the narrator describes different *places*: Combray, Paris and the Champs Elysées, Balbec, Venice, and Méséglise and Guermantes (Swann's or the Guermantes's way) at Combray. As the narrator revisits each locality, he gives an a-

<sup>22</sup> In Proust et les signes, Deleuze claims "L'oeuvre de Proust n'est pas tournée vers le passé et les découvertes de la mémoire, mais vers le futur et les progrès de l'apprentissage [. . .] le monde vacille dans le courant de l'apprentissage [. . .] La Recherche est rythmée, non pas simplement par les apports ou sédiments de la mémoire, mais par des séries de déceptions discontinues" "Proust's work is not turned toward the past and the discoveries of memory, but toward the future and the progress of learning [. . .] the world vacillates in the learning process [. . .] the rhythm of the Recherche is not simply due to the work or sedimentation of memory, but also by discontinuous series of deceptions." (35 -36).

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> This is what Genette terms *analepse* and *prolepse*. In the analepse, or flashback, the narrative returns to an event which is to have occurred previously in the story. The analepse is a textual moment which is "out of place," in which the narrative moves backwards in time to retell or recall a past event. A prolepse is an evocation of a event which is to come at a later point in the story—a flash forward.

<sup>25</sup> Throughout my text, when I will refer to the "hero" of A la Recherche du temps perdu, it will be to distinguish as the novel does, between the "young" protagonist and the "older" narrator who tells the story, although the coherence of these narrative persona is unstable, each being potentially subject to further subdivision and qualifications. The narrator who recounts the experience of the "petite madeleine" (for example) is not necessarily the same who has experienced the revelations of Le temps retrouvé. For a more systematic discussion of this problem see Marcel Muller, Les voix narratives dans 'La recherche du temps perdu', 1965 (Geneva: Droz, 1983).

chronological account of various events which took place at different moments over a period of years in each. Rather than following a plot, in the sense of a series of interconnected actions, Proust's novel is more like a series of tableaux.

This is not to imply that there is not a definite diachronic narrative, a series of events which take place in the novel, in which we learn, for example, of the narrator's family having moved into a new home, or, in Le temps retrouvé, that after two stays in a sanatorium, the hero revisits Paris after the First World War. Opposed to this linear movement of narrative is the a-chronological, paradigmatic, or descriptive practice of Marcel Proust, in which he develops the associations of multiple events with people and localities. The associative axis of narrative has been associated ever since Proust with the workings of memory, but is not usually associated with realist narrative. In Proust's novel the synchronic, or paradigmatic chain dominates the diachronic chain of the plot.

The first few pages of the novel are only the first of many reflections upon reading, and upon the boundaries between reality and imagination, sleep and waking. There are several full-length discussions of the relationship between the waking state and that of sleeping and dreaming scattered throughout the novel. Many sections of the novel begin with the hero awakening in a new room after having made a voyage to Combray, to Paris, to Balbec, to Doncières, to Tansonville, or to Venice. The awakening sleeper is one of the recurring motifs which gives unity to the disparate scenes and episodes of the work as a whole. The temporal indeterminacy characteristic of such moments is accompanied by a fluidity of space.

Reflecting on the twilight world of semiconsciousness between sleep and waking, the narrator relates his perplexity at his inability to situate the physical space in which he lies, to place himself in the here and now: "quand je m'éveillais au milieu de la nuit, comme j'ignorais où je me trouvais, je ne savais même pas au premier instant qui j'étais" (S 5), "when I awoke in the middle of the night, not knowing where I was, I could not even be sure at first who I was" (I: 5) Literally lost to the world, unable to correlate his memories to

his present sense perceptions, he is adrift in the unmastered flow of memory and sensation: "but then the memory—not yet of the place in which I was, but of various other places where I had lived and might now very possibly be—would come like a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of not-being, from which I could never have escaped by myself" (I: 5 - 6). The image of the rope let down from heaven qualifies the re-emergence of memory is a miraculous occurrence, independent of the will or effort to remember. It is a fortuitous occurrence, dependent not upon the self, but upon forces which seem to elude the processes of rational thought.

The hero's loss of consciousness of himself as self is induced in exemplary fashion by the acts of reading and dreaming. So deep is the narrator's loss of self that, when he evokes his illusory identification with the novel he is reading, it is not with a character, but with objects, works of art or history. What follows will further call into question the location as well as the time of the actions being described, and will link this uncertainty to the acts of dreaming and reading.

Thus this great novel originates, not in the epiphanic moment of involuntary memory, of fullness of meaning brought about by the taste of the famous petite madeleine, but in an experience of loss of self, and in the narrator's subsequent attempts to reconstruct his sense of being, to localize his consciousness in space and time, by clearly distinguishing between memory and perception, self and other. As Leo Bersani has put it, Proust's novel consists in a "massive—massively reiterated and illustrated—anxiety about an unidentifiable, perhaps unfindable particularity."<sup>26</sup> The title of Proust's work A la recherche du temps perdu emphasizes the search not as a task to be completed, but as an ongoing *process*.

These texts are cases in the clinical sense of the term: texts which disobey or frustrate Freud's "master plot." As such they are, in the language of a normative model of narrative behavior, "pathological." Their portrayal of a particular subjectivity is bound up in the attempt to create the monstrous inner narrative of the self, replete with all the

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<sup>26</sup> Leo Bersani, "Death and Literary Authority," A New History of French Literature, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) 863.

obsessions, manias and idiosyncratic behavior we commonly associate with eccentricity, that is to say, with personality. Branding this kind of narrative as “pathological” is simply the consequence of the Freudian model’s self-assertion as the norm. This model of narrative expectation is arguably based upon a particularly masculine version of desire and reading, thus excluding other forms, represented by texts just such as the ones I am discussing. Yet, as I hope to show, there is simultaneously at work in these novels, a formidable machine for producing narrative, one that seems to be inexhaustible and which absorbs all manifestations of novelty, and which continually frustrates all desire for completion or fully predicated actions.

## Chapter 2: Being and Nothingness in A la recherche du temps perdu

Proust's A la Recherche du temps perdu continues to fascinate us because it was among the first of the twentieth century to explore this fragility of human identity and sense of self. The fragility of the narrator's sense of self is the principal theme of the novel. Although it could be read as realist novel, an intricate portrait of bourgeois life in French society during the Belle Époque, in the period roughly from 1870 to 1921, it is also a demonstration of the precariousness, the *nothingness* of being. These two aspects of the narrative are not unrelated. Just as personality and being are fleeting, so too the concept of the nation as a unified entity is shown to be illusory.<sup>27</sup> It is in the problematic identity and disunity of the narrating subject that Proust's novel ultimately calls into question the status of the nation.

In the opening lines of the novel (which describe actions taking place much closer to the end of this quasi-circular narrative), the protagonist suffers from an unresolved and unresolvable identity crisis, revealed in his bouts with insomnia. The very first word of the novel is a reference to a period of time which is never clearly indicated.

Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure. Parfois, à peine ma bougie éteinte, mes yeux se fermaient si vite que je n'avais pas le temps de me dire: «Je m'endors.» Et, une demi-heure après, la pensée qu'il était temps de chercher le sommeil m'éveillait; je voulais poser le volume que je croyais avoir encore dans les mains et souffler ma lumière; je n'avais pas cessé en dormant de faire des réflexions sur ce que je venais de lire, mais ces réflexions avaient pris un tour un peu particulier; il me semblait que j'étais moi-même ce dont parlait l'ouvrage: une église, un quatour, la rivalité de François Ier et de Charles Quint. (S 3)

For a long time I used to go to bed early. Sometimes, when I had put out my candle, my eyes would close so quickly that I had not even time to say 'I'm going to sleep.' And half an hour later the thought that it was time to go to sleep would awaken me; I would try to put away the book which, I imagined, was still in my hands, and to blow out the light; I had

<sup>27</sup> This is the argument of Leo Bersani: "La fragilité du sens du moi [c'est] le thème principal de la vie de Marcel [...] tout entière marquée par des épisodes cruciaux qui mettent en relief une étonnante perte d'être [...] la non-reconnaissance d'un lieu [...] est ressentie comme un échec de toute désignation, et plus douloureusement encore, comme un échec de la reconnaissance du moi." "The fragility of his sense of self is the main theme in the life of Marcel [...] altogether marked by crucial episodes which put into perspective an astonishing loss of being [...] the inability to recognize a place [...] is perceived as a failure of all designation, and more painfully yet, as a failure to recognize the self." "Déguisements du moi et art fragmentaire," Recherche de Proust, Gerard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov. Eds. (Paris: Seuil, 1980) 16 - 17.

been thinking all the time, while I was asleep, of what I had just been reading, but my thoughts had run into a channel of their own, until I myself seemed actually to have become the subject of my book: a church, a quartet, the rivalry between François I and Charles V. (I: 3)

Proust's hero must first make a difficult discovery of himself in the present moment, and is at pains to relate that moment to his past and his possible future. He does not know where he is, and, as he indicates a few pages later, does not even know who he is. Neither does the reader. The vague "longtemps" here must be related to the moment of the revelation in the subsequent scene of the "petite madeleine." This event, at which point the memories which will become the novel emerge, stands in an ambiguous relation to the hero's final revelation at the Princess de Guermantes' *matinée* in Le temps retrouvé. In the first part of "Combray" (S 3 - 47) he is already an old man, having experienced most of what will come in the novel, "Il y avait déjà bien des années que, de Combray, tout ce que n'était pas le théâtre et le drame de mon coucher n'existait plus pour moi" (S 44), "Many years had elapsed during which nothing of Combray, save what was comprised in the theatre and the drama of my going to bed there, had any existence for me" (I: 48). The hypothetical moment of the novel's composition would thus fall sometime after this moment at which everything that is to come, most of the novel's action, had already taken place, including the ultimate revelations at the Princess de Guermantes's party.

The language of the Recherche expresses not the plenitude of being as presence, but the absence or void with which the narrator is faced when he tries to call upon his experience and knowledge of the world. Narrative is a supplementary act which seeks to fill the chasm, to supply something which is missing, the memories which constitute the narrator's identity.

The unreliability of human thought finally calls into question the nature of existence. This is suggested in the "Ouverture," in the narrator's efforts to remember where he was upon waking. These opening pages demonstrate the fragility of the narrator's sense of self and the tenuous nature of the line separating consciousness and

unconsciousness, and establish a tone of flux which will persist throughout the novel.

Even such absolute concepts as time and matter are called into question:

Peut-être l'immobilité des choses autour de nous leur est-elle imposée par notre certitude que ce sont elles et non pas d'autres, par l'immobilité de notre pensée en face d'elles. Toujours est-il que, quand je me réveillais ainsi, mon esprit s'agitait pour chercher, sans y réussir, à savoir où j'étais, tout tournait autour de moi dans l'obscurité, les choses, les pays, les années. Mon corps, trop engourdi pour remuer, cherchait, d'après la forme de sa fatigue, à repérer la position de ses membres pour en induire la direction du mur, la place des meubles, pour reconstruire et pour nommer la demeure où il se trouvait. Sa mémoire, la mémoire de ses côtes, de ses genoux, de ses épaules, lui présentait successivement plusieurs des chambres où il avait dormi, tandis qu'autour de lui les murs invisibles, changeant de place selon la forme de la pièce imaginée, tourbillonnaient dans les ténèbres. Et avant même que ma pensée, qui hésitait au seuil des temps et des formes, eût identifié le logis en rapprochant les circonstances, lui, - mon corps, - se rappelait pour chacun le genre du lit, la place des portes, la prise de jour des fenêtres, l'existence d'un couloir, avec la pensée que j'avais en m'y endormant et que je retrouvais au réveil. (S 6)

Perhaps the immobility of the things that surround us is forced upon them by our conviction that they are themselves and not anything else, by the immobility of our conception of them. For it always happened that when I awoke like this, and my mind struggled in an unsuccessful attempt to discover where I was, everything revolved around me through the darkness: things, places, years. My body, still too heavy with sleep to move, would endeavor to construe from the pattern of its tiredness, the position of its various limbs, in order to deduce therefrom the direction of the wall, the location of the furniture, to piece together and give a name to the house in which it lay. Its memory, the composite memory of its ribs, its knees, its shoulder-blades, offered it a whole series of rooms in which it had at one time or another slept, while the unseen walls, shifting and adapting themselves to the shape of each successive room that it remembered, whirled round it in the dark. And even before my brain, lingering in cogitation over when things had happened and what they had looked like, had reassembled the circumstances sufficiently to identify the room, it, my body, would recall from each room in succession, the style of the bed, the position of the doors, the angle at which the daylight came in at the windows, whether there was a passage outside, what I had had in my mind when I went to sleep and found there when I awoke. (I: 6)

Here the narrator posits a split between conscious memory and a body memory, only partially accessible to consciousness. The disconnection between body and mind results



in the destabilization of space and time, as the rooms spin around and adjust themselves to the posture of the sleeper. The narrator's memory of himself is strongly linked to his present sense perceptions. He describes himself dreaming of a girl, of the room in which he's sleeping, as emanations of the positions of his thigh or arms.

What is poorly understood gives way to certainty, which is in turn revised, for the narrator is not yet awake. The image of the room in which he sleeps fades away to be replaced by another, and then another: "Puis renaissait le souvenir d'une nouvelle attitude; le mur filait dans une autre direction: j'étais dans ma chambre chez Mme de Saint-Loup, à la campagne" (S 6 - 7). "Then the memory of a new position would spring up, and the wall would slide away in another direction; I was in my room in Mme de Saint-Loup's house in the country" (I: 7). The narrator's very body along with the physical space itself, are shown to be a constructs of memory and imagination. It is the fragility of this construct, the elusiveness of memory, which gives his narrative its impetus. The narrative act will be an attempt to reestablish the relationship between mind and body, thought and reality.

The suggestion that the immobility of matter is an illusion is one that would have seemed quite acceptable to Albert Einstein, who was developing his theories about the equivalence of matter and energy at the same time that Proust was writing. If the invariability of the external world is dependent upon the immobility of thought, Proust's novel will demonstrate that the variability of the latter implies the changeability of the former.

In the image of the waking narrator-hero, seeing first one and then another room from his past materialize around him, Proust offers a quick panorama of the work to come in the evocation of the various bedrooms in which the narrator has slept: "j'étais à la campagne, chez mon grand-père, mort depuis bien des années [. . .] j'étais chez Mme de Saint-Loup," When, he is finally "fully awake," the narrator spends the rest of the night trying to remember each place, and in so doing, announces the essential settings for the

whole novel: “je passais la plus grande partie de la nuit à me rappeler notre vie d’autrefois, à Combray chez ma grande-tante, à Balbec, à Paris, à Doncières, à Venise, ailleurs encore”

(9). The novel will eventually return to each these places, although through this announcement they are little more than proper names. Thus Proust establishes an imaginary topography which is little more than a toponymy, but which will provide a “map” for the reader.

As he describes himself regaining consciousness, he describes the simultaneous presence of different moments with a spatial analogy: “Un homme qui dort tient en cercle autour de lui le fil des heures, l’ordre des années et des mondes. Il les consulte d’instinct en s’éveillant et y lit en une seconde le point de la terre qu’il occupe, le temps qui s’est écoulé jusqu’à son réveil: mais leurs rangs peuvent se mêler, se rompre.” “When a man is asleep, he has in a circle round him the chain of the hours, the sequence of the years, the order of the heavenly host. Instinctively, when he awakes, he looks to these and in an instant reads off his own position on the earth’s surface and the time that has elapsed during his slumbers; but this ordered procession is apt to grow confused, and to break its ranks” (I: 5). Proust’s whole novel is a demonstration of how the “ranks” of time can intertwine, or break off, how time has a geometry which is non-linear. Proustian narration takes its cue from the sleeper who “holds in a circle around himself the thread of the hours, the order of years and worlds.” In the images of the various rooms which the narrator has known and of which he will eventually tell, Proust assembles the various settings of which the reader will learn, into a *tabelau*, as the moments are superimposed, one upon the other. To say that narrative moments can be *juxtaposed*, or *superimposed*, is to apply a visual metaphor to the apparently linear. In L’espace proustien, Georges Poulet has pointed out the way in which Proust’s novel spatializes temporality by juxtaposing different moments: “L’œuvre de Proust est faite [. . .] d’une série de scènes détachées, découpées dans le trame du réel. [. . .] ce qui était temporel est maintenant étalé. Ainsi le temps cède la place à l’espace” “Proust’s work is

made up [...] of a series of detached scenes, cut out of the thread of the real. [...] that which was temporal is now spread out. Thus time gives way to space”<sup>28</sup>

Just as the waking hero is unable to situate his place and time, it is virtually impossible to determine the context, or to localize the spatio-temporal origin, of the narrating voice in the novel. When and where should we situate the narrator who says “Longtemps” or the one which tells of staying in a sanatorium in Le temps retrouvé? It is assumed that since he begins as if he were telling the story of his life, the gap between the narrating “je” and the young hero will eventually close, but there remains, after the final reception at the Princess de Guermantes’ an unbreachable distance between the present of the narrator and the present of the narrated hero. The very structure of the narrative suggests the illusory nature of the present as the point of transition from what is not to what is no longer. The Proustian “je” is a pronoun without referent, speaking from absence, not a presence but a language. As Muller points out, “here and now do not belong to the vocabulary of the Recherche.”<sup>29</sup> When such words as “today” or “now” appear in the text, they refer sometimes to the present of the narration, sometimes to the hero’s present in the story, as if the narrator were reliving his past as another present. The “now” is constantly changing in the flux of memory and association. “Here” and “now” are, for all practical purposes, equivalent to “there” and “then.” The effect is to flatten time to a virtual present in the space of the text itself.

Proust’s project was ambitious. To unify it, he had to decide upon a form. He had already made an unsuccessful attempt at a novel, and had begun an essay in the form of a

dialogue, but it wasn’t until he decided to use a first person narrator that he found the

<sup>28</sup> Georges Poulet, L’espace proustien (Paris: Gallimard, 1963) 129-30 (my translation).

<sup>29</sup> “entre le jour de la réception chez la princesse, et celui où le Narrateur raconte cette réception, toute une ère s’étend qui maintient entre le Héros et le Narrateur un intervalle [infranchissable]. Si le Héros rejoint le Narrateur, c’est à la façon d’une asymptote: la distance qui les sépare tend vers zéro; elle ne s’annulera jamais. [...] Proust oscille entre *là-bas* et *partout*, entre *alors* et *toujours*. *Ici* et *maintenant* n’appartiennent pas au vocabulaire de La Recherche.” (49-50, 86) “between the day of the princesse’s reception and the one on which the Narrator tells us of that reception, there stretches a whole era which maintains between the Hero and the Narrator an unbreachable interval. [...] If the Hero rejoins the Narrator, it is asymptotically: the distance which separates them tends toward zero, but will never disappear. [...] Proust oscillates between *there* and *everywhere*, between *then* and *always*. *Here* and *now* do not belong to the vocabulary of the Recherche” Marcel Muller, Les Voix Narratives dans La Recherche du temps perdu, 1965 (Geneva: Droz, 1983) 86 (my translation). All further references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

means to bring all of these things together. Proust had to forgo an omniscient narrator in order to dramatize the alternation of forgetfulness and remembrance, of “time lost” and “time regained,” which would also serve to structure his great novel. As elusive as the former proves to be, the narrative is propelled forward by the promise of the latter.

The narrator of *A la Recherche du temps perdu* is continually at pains to uncover the depths of the human psyche, and, in doing so, he reveals as much through the structure of his language as he does through his observations. Proust has it both ways, regaling his passion for description and observation, while the narrator spends much time lamenting his inability to observe and understand the people and things around him “always I was incapable of seeing anything for which a desire had not already been roused in me by something I had read, anything of which I had not myself traced in advance a sketch which I wanted now to confront with reality” (III: 739). Each time he does this, however, his sketch is revealed to be a fiction and the nature of reality remains forever hidden to him. Nevertheless, Proust’s narrator goes to great effort to remember details of his observations.

The hero’s memories constitute the substance of the novel, and thus the preoccupation of the reader, but the *style* of the narration is also highly significant. Proustian syntax has often been criticized for its incessant asides and parenthetical remarks, but his sentences, while often quite long, seldom stray from the strict hierarchy of classical syntax. Even with the “cascading” subordinate clauses referred to by Coindreau, Proust’s phrases are usually grammatically and logically coherent.. Speaking of the “strange syntactic qualities” of Proust’s language, Julia Kristeva notes that they are “uncharacteristic of French” and “are thought to be closer to Latin, since the various components of Proust’s sentences are separated by unusual distances:”

The Proustian sentence, which is binary yet expansive, incorporates many subordinate clauses that delay the closure of the logical and syntactic totality, either by returning to preceding themes and linguistic items or by developing the themes and items contained in the sentence itself. What is more, Proust’s sentence contains indefinite interlocking parts that make its meaning difficult to discern...<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Julia Kristeva *Proust and the Sense of Time*, trans. Stephen Bann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) 291.

It is the delay of closure through the development of the various subordinate clauses that crystallize the aesthetic of “involuntary memory” in the Proustian sentence, forcing the reader to have to re-read, to return to the beginning of the sentence, to retrace the meandering paths of his thought.

Proust’s novel is often read as an exhaustive, even exasperating, portrayal of the sometimes incoherent patterns of human thought. The narrator attempts to systematize and catalogue the intricate turns and twists of human thought—particularly in his analyses of *jealousy*—Charles Swann’s jealousy for Odette de Crécy, and the hero’s jealousy for Albertine. What the text ultimately dramatizes is the fragility of consciousness. It demonstrates the chaos barely hidden beneath the illusion of structure, the inability of thought to be consistent, to cohere with itself over time.<sup>31</sup> The difficulty of Proust’s style is perhaps an inevitable consequence of the attempt to represent the precariousness of thought processes.

The Recherche stands in an ambiguous relationship to the genre of the autobiographical novel. For a first person recounting of the narrator’s own life, it tells us very little about him. What little factual details we have can be briefly summarized. He seems to hail from a respectable bourgeois family. We learn in A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs that his father wishes him to study law and enter the diplomatic service, while the hero himself expresses his desire to become a great writer. The narrator as protagonist, however, seldom speaks, and even when he does, his words are seldom reported, it is rather the reactions of others that we are given. Gaeton Picon calls Proust’s narrator an “un *je impersonnel*” (“an impersonal I”), and “un miroir du monde,” (“a mirror of the world”).<sup>32</sup> Marcel Muller, too, calls Proust’s narrator a “collector of images of the past” rather than an actual individual: “jamais les goûts ou les répugnances qui pourraient définir sa personne ne nous sont précisés,” “The tastes or repugnances which could define his person are never

<sup>31</sup> Margaret E. Gray has argued that the narrative voice in the Recherche is [. . .] “usually read as the rich, interiorized almost obsessively analyzed experience [. . .] of a powerful subjectivity, that subjectivity is as contested as it is developed” *Postmodern Proust* (10).

<sup>32</sup> Gaeton Picon, L’Usage de la lecture III: Lecture de Proust (Paris: Mercure de France, 1963).

precisely presented" (Muller 86). The narrator could be described as a kind of *voyeur*, an observer rather than as one who takes action, whose name is never given, and who rarely lets his own voice be heard.

Although (or because) the Recherche is from the beginning centered around the quest for personal identity by a narrator, he is the only character in the whole 3000 page novel who is almost never named. This peculiarity is all the more significant given the repeated long passages of the novel which discuss proper names: the chapters entitled "Nom de pays: le nom" and "Nom de pays: le pays," or the discussions of the etymologies of place names by the Curé of Combray in Du côté de chez Swann (103), and by professor Brichot in Sodome et Gomorrhe, 280, 316, 321). The narrator also takes great interest in the names of aristocratic families. The manifest importance of proper names in Proust's novel has led Roland Barthes to postulate, perhaps somewhat excessively, that the establishment of an onomasticon was the condition sine qua non which allowed the author to begin writing.<sup>33</sup>

His possible name is only mentioned as spoken to him by Albertine, the ultimate mysterious being in the novel. It is over a thousand pages into the novel, in an episode of La Prisonnière, that the name "Marcel" is only conditionally suggested as a *possible* name for the narrator. Having installed Albertine in his parents' apartment in Paris, he observes her sleeping. When she wakes, she speaks his name: "Elle retrouvait la parole, elle disait: «Mon» ou mon «chéri», suivi l'un ou l'autre de mon nom de baptême, ce qui, en donnant au narrateur le même prénom de l'auteur de ce livre, eût fait: «Mon Marcel», «Mon chéri

<sup>33</sup> Barthes argues that the proper names of the Recherche work as infinitely explorable signifiers: "Comme signe le Nom propre s'offre à une exploration à un déchiffrement." "As a sign the proper name offers itself to exploration, to deciphering" "si le Nom [...] est un signe, c'est un signe volumineux, un signe toujours gros d'une épaisseur touffue de sens, qu'aucun usage ne vient réduire, aplatir [...] Le nom est en effet *catalysable*; on peut le remplir, le dilater, combler les interstices de son armature sémiotique d'une infinité de rajouts [...] C'est parce que le Nom propre s'offre à une catalyse d'une richesse infinie, qu'il est possible de dire que poétiquement, toute la Recherche est sorti de quelques noms." "if the Name is a sign, it is a voluminous one, always pregnant with a dense thickness of meaning, the use of which does not reduce or flatten out [...] the name can, in effect, be expanded, filled in, dilated; the chinks in its semiotic armature can be loaded with an infinity of additions. It is because the proper name offers itself to an infinitely rich expansion that it is possible to say that, poetically, all of the Recherche came out of a few names" ("Proust et les noms" 125-28, my translation).

Marcel»" (P 67). The name is repeated for the second and last time a few pages further on, in an example of the kinds of notes Albertine would send the narrator to reassure him of her faithfulness (P 147). The general suspicion with which the narrator regards everything she tells him reflects on the reader's ability to trust her word, even when she seems to be identifying the narrator/hero by name.

With no way of situating the narrating present, and no way to identify the narrator by any name other than the pronoun "je," the narrating voice remains peculiarly anonymous, as if it were only by fully reconstructing the past that he could finally be present to himself or identify his contemporary surroundings. The Recherche is, however, among other things, a story of forgetfulness and a failure to understand people. It is no wonder then, that, in spite of the "revelation" in the final volume, a revelation which remains on the level of inarticulate perception, the prose of the book can only point toward an as yet to be written work which would incorporate the lessons learned from the involuntary memory. That A la recherche du temps perdu is that book Proust would not go so far as to say (TR 350-51).

### Memory and Oblivion

The Recherche is a novel that is as much about forgetfulness as about memory. Before the awakening of the involuntary memory all the hero could recall about Combray were fragments, bits and pieces of memories: the magic lantern and his mother's good night kiss, the little bell on the garden gate, Swann's ritual visits, and being sent to bed. These images he likens to "cette sorte de pan lumineux, découpé au milieu d'indistinctes ténèbres [. . .] toujours vu à la même heure, isolé de tout-ce qu'il pouvait y avoir autour, se détachant seul sur l'obscurité" (S 43-44), "this sort of luminous panel, sharply defined against a vague and shadowy background [. . .], seen always at the same evening hour, isolated from all that might have been around it, detached and solitary against the dark background" (I: 46 - 47). The voluntary memory is a frozen memory, one which screens as much as it reveals, thus distorting its object: "as though all Combray had consisted of but

two floors joined by a slender staircase and as though there had been no time there but seven o'clock at night" (I: 47). The Proustian hero demonstrates the frailty of memory through his inability to observe and remember. Conscious memory in the Recherche is always faltering, always inadequate, demanding supplemental information. The moment of involuntary memory is presented as a miracle, a moment of plenitude in which "the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me" (I: 48).

What many commentators overlook is that even after the awakening of the involuntary memory, and as they are evoked in the narrative, the events and characters of the novel are fragmented, synthetic.<sup>34</sup> The moment of epiphany in itself is an inarticulate impression of recognition and unfamiliarity. Strange, yet intimately familiar, the joy felt by the hero comes from *himself*: "Il m'avait aussitôt rendu les vicissitudes de la vie indifférentes [. . .], de la même façon qu'opère l'amour, en me remplissant d'une essence précieuse: ou plutôt cette essence n'était pas en moi, elle était moi" (S 44) And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous [. . .] this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me it *was* me. (I: 48). This "precious essence" emanating from within the self is nevertheless alien to the hero's consciousness. It is inexplicable, incomprehensible.

Je pose la tasse et me tourne vers mon esprit. C'est à lui de trouver la vérité. Mais comment? Grave incertitude, toutes les fois que l'esprit se sent dépassé par lui-même; quand lui, le chercheur, est tout ensemble le pays obscur où il doit chercher et où tout son bagage ne lui sera de rien. Chercher? pas seulement: créer. Il est en face de quelque chose qui n'est pas encore et que seul il peut réaliser, puis faire entrer dans sa lumière. (S 45)

I put down the cup and examine my own mind. It alone can discover the truth. But how? What an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region

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<sup>34</sup> I am referring here to Genette's definition of "synthetic narrative" in his discussion of the last scene in the novel: the Princess of Guermantes's reception, "qui est presque constamment traitée sur le mode itératif: ce n'est pas le déroulement diachronique de la réception chez la princesse, dans la succession des événements qui la remplissent, qui commande la composition du texte, mais plutôt l'énumération d'un certain nombre de classes d'occurrences, dont chacune synthétise plusieurs événements dispersés en fait tout au long de la «matinée» [...] j'appellerai ce second type *itération interne* ou *synthétisante*" [. . .] (150).



through which it must go seeking and where all its equipment will avail it nothing. Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not yet exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of day. (I: 49)

The extreme effort the protagonist must make to understanding its origins and meaning demonstrate the misrecognition, the misapprehension implicit in any conscious understanding of oneself.<sup>35</sup> It is only through great effort that he is able to plumb the depths of its meaning and to give narrative form and consistency to what was only a fleeting inarticulate sensation. The proustian moment always requires a supplementary act of decipherment, which is equivalent to the act of writing. The search is in fact a creation. Any pretense to truth must be qualified by the impossibility of objectivity when the subject is indistinguishable from its object.

Proust's equivalent of Faulkner's postage stamp might well be the cup of tea in which his protagonist dips the madeleine. It is from this tiny space that all of his novel is said to emerge:

Et dès que j'eus reconnu le goût du morceau de Madeleine trempé dans le tilleul que me donnait ma tante (quoique je ne susse pas encore et dusse remettre à bien plus tard de découvrir pourquoi ce souvenir me rendait si heureux), aussitôt la vieille maison grise sur la rue, où était sa chambre, vint comme un décor de théâtre s'appliquer au petit pavillon, donnant sur le jardin, qu'on avait construit pour mes parents sur ses derrières (ce pan tronqué que seul j'avais revu jusque-là); et avec la maison, la ville, depuis le matin jusqu'au soir et par tous les temps, la Place où on m'envoyait avant déjeuner, les rues où j'allais faire des courses, les chemins qu'on prenait si le temps était beau. Et comme dans ce jeu où les Japonais s'amuse à tremper dans un bol de porcelaine rempli d'eau, de petits morceaux de papier jusque-là indistincts qui, à peine y sont-ils plongés s'étirent, se contournent, se colorent, se différencient, deviennent des fleurs, des maisons, des personnages consistants et reconnaissables, de même maintenant toutes les fleurs de notre jardin et celles du parc de M. Swann, et les nymphéas de la Vivonne, et les bonnes gens du village et leurs petits logis et l'église et tout Combray et ses environs, tout cela qui prend forme et solidité, est sorti, ville et jardins, de ma tasse de thé. (S 47)

And as soon as I had recognized the taste of the piece of madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime-blossom which my aunt used to give me (although I did not yet know and must long postpone the discovery of why

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<sup>35</sup> Or what a Lacanian might refer to as the absolute *otherness* of the unconscious.

this memory made me so happy), immediately the old grey house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like a stage set to attach itself to the little pavilion opening on to the garden which had been built out behind it for my parents (the isolated segment which until that moment had been all that I could see); and with the house the town, from morning to night and in all weathers, the Square where I used to be sent before lunch, the streets along which I used to run errands, the country roads we took when it was fine. As in the game wherein the Japanese amuse themselves by filling a porcelain bowl with water and steeping in it little pieces of paper which until then are without character or form, but, the moment they become wet, stretch and twist and take on colour and distinctive shape, become flowers or houses or people, solid and recognisable, so in that moment, all the flowers in our garden and in Mr. Swann's park, and the water lilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and its surroundings, taking shape and solidity, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea. (I: 51)

It is not from the teacup itself, but from the hidden recesses, the black hole of memory that the narrator's story emerges, across the span of time, through the resemblance of a sensory perception in the present to a forgotten one in the past. The involuntary memory in Proust is not the narrative, but a moment which remains isolated, privileged, an "epiphany," in which the subject expresses a sense of self-presence: "J'avais cessé de me sentir médiocre contingent mortel" (S 44). This sense of exaltation is concurrent with the resurrection of the forgotten past in the guise of people and places. The narrator's chance encounter with such sensations triggers what Proust calls "involuntary memory." Out of the formlessness and insignificance of the "little pieces of paper" or the empty teacup all of the beings and things which existed in the past are made present. This event happens unexpectedly, independently of the hero's will. This involuntary memory is opposed to the conscious act of remembering, which pales in comparison, and could be thought of as a kind of forgetting.

As soon as the hero seeks to articulate the epiphanic moment and to intentionally examine the sensations of memory which it resurrects, the moment has passed: "Je pose la tasse et me tourne vers mon esprit. C'est à lui de trouver la vérité, mais comment?" (S 45). The work of remembering is not merely a task of seeking out the truth from forgotten

memories, he says, but a task of creation. The novel grows out of the desire to illuminate the "vague and shadowy background," to restore the narrative of reality. It is a difficult, conscious effort, far removed from the involuntary memory's moment of "epiphany."

C'est ainsi que, pendant longtemps, quand, réveillé la nuit, je me ressouvenais de Combray, je n'en revis jamais que cette sorte de pan lumineux, découpé au milieu d'indistinctes ténèbres, pareil à ceux que l'embrasement d'un feu de Bengale ou quelque projection électrique éclairent et sectionnent dans un édifice dont les autres parties restent plongées dans la nuit : à la base assez large, le petit salon, la salle à manger, l'amorce de l'allée obscure par où arriverait M. Swann, l'auteur inconscient de mes tristesses, le vestibule où je m'acheminai vers la première marche de l'escalier, si cruel à monter, qui constituait à lui seul le tronc fort étroit de cette pyramide irrégulière ; et, au faite, ma chambre à coucher avec le petit couloir à porte vitrée pour l'entrée de maman ; en un mot, toujours vu à la même heure, isolé de tout ce qu'il pouvait y avoir autour, se détachant seul sur l'obscurité, le décor strictement nécessaire (comme celui qu'on voit indiqué en tête des vieilles pièces pour les représentations en province), au drame de mon déshabillage; comme si Combray n'avait consisté qu'en deux étages reliés par un mince escalier, et comme s'il n'y avait jamais été que sept heures du soir. À vrai dire, j'aurais pu répondre à qui m'eût interrogé que Combray comprenait encore autre chose et existait à d'autres heures. Mais comme ce que je m'en serais rappelé m'eût été fourni seulement par la mémoire volontaire, la mémoire de l'intelligence, et comme les renseignements qu'elle donne sur le passé ne conservent rien de lui, je n'aurais jamais eu envie de songer à ce reste de Combray. Tout cela était en réalité mort pour moi.

Mort à jamais ? C'était possible.

Il y a beaucoup de hasard en tout ceci, et un second hasard, celui de notre mort, souvent ne nous permet pas d'attendre longtemps les faveurs du premier. (S 43)

And so it was that, for a long time afterwards, when I lay awake at night and revived old memories of Combray, I saw no more of it than this sort of luminous panel, sharply defined against a vague and shadowy background, like the panels which the glow of a Bengal light or a searchlight beam will cut out and illuminate in a building the other parts of which remain plunged in darkness: broad enough at its base, the little parlour, the dining room, the opening of the dark path from which M. Swann, the unwitting author of my sufferings, would emerge, the hall through which I would journey to the first step of that staircase, so painful to climb, which constituted, all by itself, the slender cone of this irregular pyramid; and, at the summit, my bedroom, with the little passage through whose glazed door Mamma would enter; in a word, seen always at the same evening hour, isolated from all its possible surroundings, detached and solitary against the dark background, the bare minimum of scenery necessary (like the decor one sees prescribed on the title-page of an old play, for its

performance in the provinces) to the drama of my undressing; as though all Combray had consisted of but two floors joined by a slender staircase, and as though there had been no time there but seven o'clock at night. I must own that I could have assured any questioner that Combray did include other scenes and did exist at other hours than these. But since the facts which I should then have recalled would have been prompted only by voluntary memory, the memory of the intellect, and since the pictures which that kind of memory shows us preserve nothing of the past itself, I should never have had any wish to ponder over this residue of Combray. To me it was in reality all dead.

Permanently dead? Very possibly

There is a huge element of chance in these matters, and a second chance occurrence, that of our own death, often prevents us from awaiting for any length of time the favours of the first. (I: 46 - 7)

Here the memory of the intellect is equated with forgetting, with a kind of death. There is a sense in which chance (*le hasard*) is equivalent to death, since it seems to negate the will or efforts of the individual. So paramount a role does chance play in Proust's novel that often it is capitalized. It is at once that which brings death, through the unexpected, and that which brings life, awakening the hero from the slumber of the *quotidien*. The involuntary memory, which the narrator claims to be more real than ordinary memory (which is then more akin to forgetting) is fundamentally dependent on forces beyond the conscious control of the subject, on the chance encounter of an object which evokes it.

The narrator spends a great deal of textual time lamenting his inability to observe and understand the people and things around him. He details his obsessive desire for Gilberte Swann, Mme Swann, Madame de Guermantes and finally Albertine. He goes so far as to surreptitiously follow Madame de Guermantes in her walks around Paris. In Proust the other is an enigma to be deciphered, but which continually frustrates all efforts to know. Interposed between the observer and the world is the mirror of language. The hero realizes this only in the final volume "j'étais incapable de voir ce dont le désir n'avait pas été éveillé en moi par quelque lecture, ce dont je n'avais pas d'avance dessiné moi-même le croquis que je désirais ensuite confronter avec la réalité" (TR 25), "Always I was incapable of seeing anything for which a desire had not already been roused in me by something I had read, anything of which I had not myself traced in advance a sketch which

I wanted now to confront with reality" (III: 739). Each time he does this, however, his "sketch" is revealed to be false. Reality remains forever elusive, hidden to him.

This inability to know, to fully define one's context becomes an inability to know oneself, and thus an inability to *be*. The narrator is the only character in the novel who is never specifically and explicitly named.<sup>36</sup> Yet, the text spends much of its time meditating on the significance of names: names of people and of places. This helps explain the hero's fascination with the aristocracy, whose names signify both places and people. In the following chapters I will consider the role of the proper name in a discussion of Proust's social kaleidoscope and of Faulkner's "epic" of the South, but first I will examine the way in which Faulkner's novels attempt to represent thought through the use of "stream of consciousness" techniques.

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<sup>36</sup> Marcel Muller calls Proust's narrator a "possessor of the other": "Avoir un nom, c'est être pour autrui cet objet qu'autrui est pour nous [. . .]. Si je n'a pas de nom et qu'en revanche les villes et les êtres sont avant tout leur nom, c'est que le rapport que ce je entretient avec autrui n'est pas réciproque [. . .] l'anonymat tendrait [. . .] à consacrer la prééminence du Héros sur l'autre" (17). "To have a name is to be for others that object that the other is for us [. . .]. If I has no name and on the contrary, cities and beings are before anything else their names, it is because the relationship that this I holds with others is not reciprocal [. . .] anonymity tends to consecrate the preeminence of the hero over the other." What I am arguing here would rather take the opposing position. The hero's lack of a name marks the preeminence of the world over him, his inability to distinguish self and other.

### Chapter 3: Identity and Consciousness in the Novels of William Faulkner

While Faulkner's novels offer a portrait of a certain society, they are also studies in human psychology, most notably in his use of stream-of consciousness technique to portray the human psyche. Two of his major works, The Sound and the Fury, and Absalom, Absalom! attempt to represent the sometimes incoherent thoughts of their protagonists. The former employs what is often referred to as the "stream of consciousness" technique, while the latter puts into play the voices of multiple storytellers in its attempt to retell the story of Thomas Sutpen. Whether it be through one narrator or many storytellers, Faulkner's novels are studies in psychological processes, in the idiosyncratic ways that human minds work. As such, they share fundamental precepts with the work of Proust.

It would be implausible to argue that Proust had no influence upon Faulkner, although there is little direct evidence of such in any of the Yoknapatawpha stories. The Recherche is certainly never named in the course of Faulkner's novels, but Faulkner was curious and attentive to developments in continental literature. Michael Grimwood among others has noted that Faulkner displayed a definite "francophilia," which led him to take up residence in Paris in 1925.<sup>37</sup>

André Bleikasten suggests that most Faulkner criticism has ignored his connections with European writers, arguing that "Like all American novelists," Faulkner is "a novelist of European descent. His many fathers include Cervantes, Scott, Balzac, Dickens, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Hardy, Conrad, Mann, Joyce, and Proust, to mention only the novelists." (75). Bleikasten laments that most Anglo-American critics tend to ignore the importance of the international context of Faulkner's work and reception, his relation to twentieth-century novelists from non-English-speaking countries: "Faulkner's novels possess an enduring power beyond the culture out of which they arose and even beyond the language in which they were written, since most of their non-American readers know them only

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<sup>37</sup> "He went to France, at [friend Phil] Stone's urging, because both considered it the homeland of any writer" (31).

through translations.” If this were not the case, argues Bleikasten, Faulkner’s novels would never have gained so much recognition in France: “Did Faulkner’s novels not somehow exceed the occasion of their birth, how could they have won recognition in France and be admired by Malraux and Sartre (two writers on the left, neither of whom was an expert on the South) long before they were taken seriously in Faulkner’s own country?” (76).<sup>38</sup>

In his discussion of Faulkner’s European connections, Bleikasten notes that “modern novelists all knew that there was no such thing as objective reality, only each individual’s *sense* of it. Hence their abiding fascination with consciousness, with the flickerings of subjective perception and the eddies of subjective experience—with what philosophers at the turn of the century like James, Bergson, and Bradley identified as ‘stream of consciousness,’ ‘real duration,’ or ‘immediate experience.’”<sup>39</sup>

Finally, it is interesting to note what Faulkner himself said about his European influences. It is an interview he gave in 1952 which is at the origin of the present study. Speaking to Loic Bouvard, a French graduate student in political science at Princeton who had asked him about his opinion of France, Faulkner professed a love for France and the French people, although he qualified that admiration: “I greatly admire the French spirit, even though you do tend to ‘polish’ people too much. The French think too much, and in doing so, destroy something of man’s original flavor. Be careful of man in the abstract” (LG 72). This criticism of the alleged French penchant for abstract thought draws on a cliché in which the European intellectual is opposed to the “simplicity” or unpretentiousness of American art. As many critics have noted, Faulkner often pretended to be a simple farmer, but this stance was no more honest than his pretending to be a

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<sup>38</sup> “Faulkner From a European Perspective” in The Cambridge Companion to Faulkner, 75 - 95.

<sup>39</sup> Bleikasten names twelve European authors whom he identifies along with Faulkner as “the major figures of Western fiction in the first half of our century.” These authors, he says “all bear witness to the increasing acceleration and complexification of the ‘inward turn’ taken by the novel since the late nineteenth century. Whether they adopted autobiographical modes or resorted to polymodal or polyphonic arrangements, they all created sharply interiorized fictional spaces, in which the reader was made to feel individual psyches at work.” André Bleikasten. “Faulkner from a European Perspective” in The Cambridge Companion to Faulkner, ed. Philip M. Weinstein. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 75 - 95.

wounded World War I aviator. It is interesting, then, that in the interview, Faulkner went on to profess his admiration for an artist who is often accused of excessive analysis. Asked specifically about French writers, Faulkner had this to say about Marcel Proust: "I was influenced by Flaubert and by Balzac, whose way of writing everything bluntly with the stub of his pen I admire very much. And by Bergson, obviously. And I feel very close to Proust. After I had read A la Recherche du Temps Perdu I said 'This is it!--and I wished I had written it myself' (LG 72); but in another interview, at Nogano in 1955, Faulkner seems to deny the influence of Proust on his writing: "Proust I have read. The names I mentioned yesterday were the names of the men who I think influenced me. When I read Joyce and Proust it is possible that my career as a writer was already fixed, so that there was no chance for it to be influenced other than in the tricks of the trade, you might say" (LG 112).

It is doubtful to what extent an author's comments about his own work can be used to judge that work, and Faulkner's insistence that his career was already "fixed" when he read Proust hardly seems likely, but it is interesting to see here that Faulkner seems to attribute to these writers a possible "formal" influence in the "tricks of the trade." What Faulkner is implying here by "the tricks of the trade" can only be guessed at, but the implication seems to be that these "tricks" would have more to do with the "mechanics" of writing novels more than the themes or ideas contained in them. Faulkner seeks here to deny any thematic connections, but such a denial remains suspect, and invites closer scrutiny.

What other connections could Faulkner have felt to this French author known for his obsessive descriptions and analyses? One answer to this question is, simply, their efforts to portray the complexity of human beings and their relations. They owe as much to the tradition of phenomenological realism, which seeks not to present an "objective" depiction of the real, but demonstrates the mind's production of the real. James Joyce was one of Proust's contemporaries who shared this concern with the representation of the



phenomena of perception and thought, and Faulkner's work also demonstrates its indebtedness to Joyce, not only in the "stream of consciousness" technique which it employs, and which Joyce is famous for, but also in his use of names taken from Greek mythology.

In what has often been called an "epic" of the American South, William Faulkner portrays a society confronted with its own failure and defeat. Édouard Glissant praises Faulkner's novels as exemplary of what he calls a poetics of relation, in which the perilous encounter between cultures is played out in closed space of the plantation system. What is at stake in this encounter is the integrity of an identity based upon exclusion of the other. Western civilization has always tended to marginalize or exclude the other in its attempt to affirm and legitimize a self-sufficient identity. The mechanism by which this society has always perpetuated its structures of dominance is the patriarchal system, in which lineage is meant to assure an unbroken orderly transferral of from one generation to another within the structure of the family tree. This might be one explanation for the longevity of many of the principal actors in the Old Testament. The missing names in the long lists of lineage are covered over by making one person live the equivalent of several generations.

The entire *oeuvre* of William Faulkner deals with the disintegration of the patriarchal family, and therefore, in a larger sense, with the collapse of western (European) social structure, brought about by the encounter between different cultures in the southern United States, and by the traumatic event which was the Civil War. We will return to the cultural implications of Faulkner's tragedy in our consideration of the role of the proper name and lineage, in a subsequent chapter.

Although William Faulkner purports to be telling about his region, his is also a "comédie humaine," something that he acknowledged himself when he admitted his debt to Balzac (LG 72). These novels dramatize a crisis of identity which translates into a crisis of the means of identification, of the process of identification in language through the construction of narrative: the personal narrative of a speaking or writing subject, or the

inner narrative of consciousness as manifested in language. The voice which emerges is precariously fragmented, a continual negotiation with chaos in the form of language, that is to say in the form of pure formality.

### French Readings of Faulkner through Proust

By the end of the 1930s Faulkner had already gained recognition among European writers, and continues today to be widely read, most especially by third-world writers. The interest that Faulkner holds for international audiences is related to his use of narrative techniques familiar to non-Western traditions as much as to the themes raised by his texts. The most striking of these is the liberation of narrative from the exigencies of chronology, from the a narrative form based on a conception of time as linearity.

The French novelists and philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and André Malraux were among the first to recognize the importance of Faulkner's work, even before he gained the respect of many American readers. In introducing Faulkner to the French, Sartre found it quite logical to compare the two authors. In his preface to the French translation of The Sound and the Fury, Sartre saw obvious connections between Proust and Faulkner, in the ways they thematized what he saw as the essential existential problems of being and time. Like Faulkner, he criticized Proust for what he identified as his penchant for analysis, a trait which he identifies as stereotypically French:

Faulkner est un homme perdu et c'est parce qu'il se sent perdu qu'il risque, qu'il va jusqu'au bout de sa pensée. Proust est un classique et un Français: les Français se perdent à la petite semaine et ils finissent toujours par se retrouver. L'éloquence, le goût des idées claires, l'intellectualisme ont imposé à Proust de garder au moins les apparences de la chronologie.

Faulkner is a man who is lost, and it is because he feels himself lost that he takes risks, following through to the consequences of his thought. Proust is a classical and a Frenchman: the French lose themselves weekly, and always end up finding themselves again. Eloquence, the taste for clear ideas, intellectualism all forced Proust to keep at least the appearance of chronology.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Situations I (77). My translation.

Sartre's sensitivity to the chronological organization of Proust's narrative belies his philosophical concerns with the concepts of being and time. The interdependence of these concepts is reflected even in the physical sciences of the twentieth century, in Einstein's famous equation which equating mass with energy. Time and energy share one essential characteristic which are the concepts of *movement* or *change*, whereas the traditional idea of being implies permanence, stasis.

Sartre's initial purpose was to alert French readers to the idiosyncrasies of Faulkner's style: "Quand on lit Le Bruit et la Fureur, on est frappé d'abord par les bizarreries de la technique. Pourquoi Faulkner a-t-il cassé le temps de son histoire et en a-t-il brouillé les morceaux?" (70), "When one reads The Sound and the Fury, he is at first struck by the peculiarities of his technique. Why did Faulkner break up the time of his story and why did he mix up the pieces?" To present Faulkner's difficulties to the French reader, Sartre refers to Marcel Proust's novel:

Tel est le temps de Faulkner. Ne le reconnaît-on pas? Ce présent indicible et qui fait eau de toutes parts, ces brusques invasions du passé, cet ordre affectif, opposé à l'ordre intellectuel et volontaire qui est chronologique mais qui manque la réalité, ces souvenirs, hantises monstrueuses et discontinues, ces intermittences du cœur [. . .], ne retrouve-t-on pas le temps perdu et reconquis de Marcel Proust? (74)

Such is the time of Faulkner. Do we not recognize it? This unspeakable liquified present, these brusque invasions of the past, this affective order, opposed to the intellectual and voluntary order which is chronological but which lacks reality, these memories, monstrous hauntings and discontinuities, these intermittences of the heart [. . .], do we not here rediscover the time lost and conquered of Marcel Proust?<sup>41</sup>

What interested Sartre was the narrative point of view represented by each novelist, and their protagonists's attitudes with respect to time.

In Sartoris, says Sartre, Faulkner always shows events when they have already taken place, and in The Sound and the Fury, nothing happens, all has already happened:

Il semble qu'on puisse comparer la vision du monde de Faulkner à celle d'un homme assis dans une auto découverte et qui regarde en arrière. A

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<sup>41</sup> My translation.

chaque instant des ombres surgissent à sa droite, à sa gauche, papillotements, tremblements tamisés. . . qui ne deviennent des arbres, des hommes, des voitures qu'un peu plus tard, avec le recul. Le passé y gagne une sorte de surréalité: ses contours sont durs et nets, immuables; le présent, innomable et fugitif, se défend mal contre lui; il est plein de trous, et, par ces trous, les choses passées l'envahissent, fixes, immobiles, silencieuses comme des juges ou comme des regards . . . Dans *Sartoris*, le passé s'appelait «les histoires», parce qu'il s'agissait de souvenirs familiaux et construits, parce que Faulkner n'avait pas encore trouvé sa technique. Dans *Le Bruit et la Fureur*, il est plus individuel et plus indécis" (73).

Faulkner's vision of the world seems comparable to that of a man seated in an open car and looking backwards. At each instant, formless shadows, flutterings, vague tremblings, and a kind of confetti of light appear to the right and to the left, but only with distance do they become trees, men, and automobiles. The past takes on a kind of superreality; its contours are firm and clear, unchangeable. The present, undefined and fleeting, is weak by comparison. It is full of holes, and the things of the past invade it through these holes—things that are fixed, immovable, silent as judges or stares. Faulkner's monologues remind us of airplane flights replete with air pockets: at each pocket the hero's consciousness "falls into the past" and then rises only to fall again. The present is not; it becomes; everything *was*.<sup>42</sup>

Salvation for Proust's narrator, says Sartre, lies in the integral reappearance of the past. For Faulkner, on the other hand, the past is never lost—unfortunately—it is always there, as an obsession. While the narrator of *La Recherche* expresses nostalgia for, and a wish to recapture, a past which comes to him through works of art, Faulkner's protagonists are haunted by an ever-present past which seems almost to negate the passage of time.

Faulkner, like Proust, was familiar with the teachings of Henri Bergson (if the author's comments can be trusted, which is an entirely different problem). He seems to have embraced more wholeheartedly the theories of Bergson than Proust. In his 1952 interview with Loic Bouvard he affirmed that "there isn't any time."

In fact I agree pretty much with Bergson's theory of the fluidity of time. There is only the present moment, in which I include both the past & the future, and that is eternity. In my opinion time can be shaped quite a bit by the artist; after all, man is never time's slave. (LG 70)

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<sup>42</sup> "A Propos de *Le Bruit et la Fureur*: La temporalité chez Faulkner," *Situations I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947) 70 - 81. English translation by George McMillan Reeves, from *The time of William Faulkner: Essays by Maurice Edgar Coindreau*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1971) 70.

The artist may be capable of shaping time, but in Quentin Compson, Faulkner has portrayed a character who is obsessed with time's passing.

Sartre groups Faulkner and Proust with other early twentieth-century novelists like James Joyce, Dos Passos, André Gide and Virginia Woolf. All of these authors, he says, attempted to "mutilate" time. He points out similarities between Proust and Faulkner in their attempts to present characters' perceptions of the past, perceptions which do not follow strict (chrono)logical order, but which are instead based upon what he terms "affective constellations," a few central themes around which "innumerable silent masses gravitate."

Sartre admired Faulkner for having "decapitated" time. Faulkner's characters, he said, have no future, because their consciousnesses are so fixed upon the past, which is omnipresent. The best example of this might be Quentin Compson: his "thoughts" on April 1910 are given to us in the past tense, as if he were remembering from a point in time either at or beyond the moment of his suicide. All of Faulkner's art, says Sartre, is aimed at suggesting that Quentin's interior monologues, and his last stroll, are *already* his suicide. "Quentin pense sa dernière journée au passé, comme quelqu'un qui se souvient. Mais qui donc se souvient, puisque les dernières pensées du héros coïncident à peu près avec l'éclatement de sa mémoire et son anéantissement?" (*Situations I* 78) "Quentin thinks his last day in the past tense, as someone who remembers, but who could be remembering, since the last thoughts of the hero coincide more or less with the disruption of his memory and the cessation of his existence." The future, says Sartre, no longer exists as a possibility for Faulkner's characters: "ce n'est pas une entreprise, c'est une fatalité; en perdant son caractère de possible, il cesse d'exister au futur," "it is not an undertaking; it is a fatality; in losing its character of possibility, it ceases to exist in the future."

Elyane Dezon-Jones, sees reason to believe that Faulkner was influenced by Proust. F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe and Jack Kerouac, she says, all took up Proust's central theme, transforming the quest for lost time into a quest for a lost

national continuity, a legitimizing historical consciousness. The heroes of the Lost and the Beat generations are all men situated in time “faced with its unacceptable irreversibility” (12). The Faulknerian character’s obsession with the past is something at once irretrievably lost and inescapable is worth reading in contrast to the Proustian hero’s search for lost time.

Faulkner had a copy of Proust’s novel in his library, although this does not prove that he read it. Nor do the statements he gave in interviews prove anything, since Faulkner is notorious for telling tall tales about himself. It is rather through the discernable similarities in their texts that such inferences can be made. Richard P. Adams sees “strong internal evidence” indicating that Faulkner had indeed read at least part of Remembrance of things Past before he wrote The Sound and the Fury, since the latter novel displays “the same obsessive preoccupation with time, with memory and with change” as in Proust’s. There is no way of definitively answering the question of Proust’s influence on Faulkner, but this should not stop us from reading the second through the lenses provided by the former.

In each of these novels a protagonist is haunted by memories, or more precisely, memories come back to haunt them. The *involuntary* nature of memory is apparent in Faulkner as well as Proust. Although there have been numerous volumes written about each, there are surprisingly few full-length studies devoted to both of these writers whose style, themes and approach bear some striking similarities. They deserve study together if for no other reason than that they are each considered by many critics to be “the greatest” twentieth-century novelists of their respective national cultures.

These authors present what might be styled a “poetics of consciousness” in which consciousness and remembering proceed not through orderly progression but by quantum shifts and sedimentation—the accumulation of connections and relationships between elements which are themselves merely positions on a network—a web of inter and intratextual shifters. The shifters are not confined to pronouns or adverbs such as “here,”

“now,” “I,” “you” etc., but proper names themselves can shift referents. The change represented in society by the fall or rise in stature of different figures, of different families, is just one example of the ways in which time segments characters, in which time *separates* the name from presence or meaning.

### “Perfidious Arabesques”

What Faulkner and Proust’s novels put to the forefront is the *paths* of their protagonists thoughts. Proust’s long periodic sentences are notorious for continually qualifying the status of their affirmations, by multiplying the possible alternatives of motivation and interpretation, until the status of the action or object itself is called into question. The language of Faulkner’s novels can also demonstrate certain stylistic excesses. Maurice Edgar Coindreau remarked of the imbricated Faulknerian sentence that “His texts necessitate a sustained effort; the tangled sentences, interrupted by digressions and parentheses, [envelop] thought in perfidious arabesques”<sup>43</sup>

Coindreau’s remarks could apply equally well to Proustian syntax. the “perfidious arabesques” of Faulkner’s language, referred to by Coindreau, demonstrate the complex movement of thought. It is finally the status of perception and the possibility of arriving at a meaning which is problematized by this language of digression and continual deferral. The reader is forced to go back, and reread so as to follow each and every diverging path. Proust makes every effort to provide the reader with a way out, no matter how circuitous a path he must take. For all their length and complexity, Proust’s sentences are almost always grammatically correct, though it is true that occasionally a sentence fails to reach its logical conclusion. In spite of the author’s occasional mistakes (such as the reappearance of characters who are supposed to have already died), Proust’s narrator is forever attempting to *sort out* the multiple threads of possibilities, the many layers of motivation and chance which he believes explain the actions of others.

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<sup>43</sup> From Coindreau’s “Note” to his French translation of Faulkner’s short story “Afternoon of a Cow,” attributed to the pseudonymous “Ernest V. Trueblood” (“L’Après-Midi d’une Vache, par Ernest V. Trueblood”). Translated by Grimwood (5).

Perhaps the most striking examples of the way in which Faulkner "mutilates" time in his narratives occur in The Sound and the Fury in which he makes ample use of the prolepsis and analepsis. The novel attempts to portray distinct personalities through the ways in which they use language to segment and splice together perception. The "stream of consciousness" narrative style is characterized by abrupt unsignalled changes in the time and setting of the images and events it depicts. It is in the failure of such texts to clearly signal such movement that they are seen as representative of conscious processes. Unlike in a storytelling situation, explanations and contexts do not need to be furnished, since such a technique is not aimed uniquely at telling a story, but at representing thought.

The novel is divided into four chapters, which are usually identified with the characters whose "points of view" they seem to represent, although Faulkner gave them, not titles, but dates: "April Seventh, 1928," "June Second 1910," "April Sixth 1928," and "April Eighth 1928." Each section would thus constitute a discrete span of time from the others. They are usually read as being four different "points of view," four different versions of a story, as seen or experienced by four separate individuals.<sup>44</sup> The first three chapters are distinct from the fourth, as they employ first person narrators to portray the intimate thoughts, the consciousness, of three different characters: the 33 year old "idiot," Benjy, and his brothers, Quentin, and Jason. The fourth chapter is presented in an omniscient mode, although it is focused on their African American servant Dilsey, following her activities on the date in question. While the other three attempt to represent the thoughts, and thought patterns, of the three Compson brothers: Benjy, Quentin, and Jason, chapter four *tells* us Dilsey's thoughts, rather than attempting to *represent* them. It is only the third and fourth chapters, Jason's interior monologue and the omniscient last section, which remain squarely focused on the time frame set by their titles. Benjy's attention frequently

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<sup>44</sup> Point of view is another slippery concept, which, like the concepts of voice, or style, posits a controlling subject, the eye/I which sees and relates the story. The reliance on a first person narrator, represented by the pronoun "I" means that the concept of point of view is bound up with the concept of time, since the pronoun, as a "shifter" can only be defined through its context, its location in space and time. Faulkner's narrators are all strictly linked to specific places and times, but the past invades the present to such an extent that it is omnipresent, inescapable and quite often difficult to distinguish from the present.



shifts from his consciousness of the present moment to his memories of other, similar moments. Quentin's thoughts are likewise prone to such fluxes of perception and memory.

Very few of Faulkner's characters live entirely in the present, and very few plan for the future (except perhaps Jason Compson), as they are continually immersed in images of the past. Benjy's narrative is an example of an unchecked involuntary memory. He does not clearly distinguish between the present and the past, his memory and his existence in the present. The reader must make more of an effort to distinguish the temporal strata represented in Benjy's narrative. Luster's mention of Benjy's age ("aint you something, thirty-three years old, going on that way" and the mention of his birthday cake, that allows the reader to isolate the "present," identified by the title of his section ("April Seventh, 1928), from the memories.

#### Benjy Compson's Involuntary Memory

The most striking thing about Benjy and Quentin Compson's sections of The Sound and the Fury is the discontinuity of their narratives. Benjy's thoughts on April seventh, 1928 do not follow a logical order, from beginning to end, but jump from one moment to the other, from one image to another. The story of is not a chronology, but a juxtaposition of images, images which are sometimes motivated by an obvious similarity or association of perceptions, as when Benjy is crawling through the "broken place" at the limit of the Compson property, and snags himself. This past event is perhaps called to Benjy's consciousness by the similarity of his sensation in the present to the memory of that sensation in the past. This is the definition of Proust's involuntary memory. Benjy's section of The Sound and the Fury is a good example of this kind of memory.<sup>45</sup>

Benjy's point of view is characterized by chronological incoherence. His thoughts jump without warning from present perceptions to memories, and it is often difficult to distinguish between them. The title of the section, "April Seventh 1928" indicates a

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<sup>45</sup> Dezon-Jones has called Benjy "une mémoire involontaire à l'état pur," "an involuntary memory in its purest form" (103).

temporal reference which is not the starting point of any particular story, but a day in the life of Benjy Compson. Its only immediate significance seems to be that it is the day of his thirty-third birthday. The chapter gives us his thoughts and perceptions during part of that day, and these thoughts include observations of things he sees and does as well as things he has seen and done. Frequently, and without any warning or clear indication, his view turns from the present to the past, so that it is not always clear to the casual reader when these transitions take place.

Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting. They were coming toward where the flag was and I went along the fence. Luster was hunting in the grass by the flower tree.

The first sentence presents the reader with incomplete information. An "I" is describing an event to which he or she was witness, presumably on the date specified by the title of the chapter, although it could very well be that it is instead another date on which the "I" is telling this story, or both. A number of questions arise almost instantly: "Who is this 'I'?" Who are "they?" What are they hitting, where and why? In the traditional, or "Balzacian" novel, the reader would expect an explanation, but these questions remained unanswered. The reader of this first section is thus immediately disconcerted by their inability to make sense of what is happening, and must immediately begin actively searching for clues as to what is going on. It is only after the next two sentences that the reader can divine that a game of golf is being described. It is baffling in that the speaker's interest is not, as might be expected, the game or the golfers themselves, but their movements, for the actions of the golfers are described as events in and of themselves, rather than elements of a logical process:

They took the flag out, and they were hitting. Then they put the flag back and they went to the table, and he hit and the other hit. Then they went on, and I went along the fence. Luster came away from the flower tree and we went along the fence and they stopped and we stopped and I looked through the fence while Luster was hunting in the grass.

"Here, caddie." He hit. They went across the pasture. I held to the fence and watched them going away.

"Listen at you, now." Luster said. "Aint you something, thirty-three years old, going on that way. After I done went all the way to town to buy you that cake. Hush up that moaning. Aint you going to help me find that quarter so I can go to the show tonight."

They were hitting little, across the pasture. I went back along the fence to where the flag was. It flapped on the bright grass and the trees.

"Come on." Luster said. "We done looked there. They aint no more coming right now. Lets go down to the branch and find that quarter before them niggers finds it."

It was red, flapping on the pasture. Then there was a bird slanting and tilting on it. Luster threw. The flag flapped on the bright grass and the trees. I held to the fence.

"Shut up that moaning," Luster said. "I cant make them come if they aint coming, can I. If you dont hush up, mammy aint going to have no birthday for you. If you dont hush, you know what I going to do. I going to eat that cake all up. Eat them candles, too. Eat all them thirty-three candles. Come on, let's go down to the branch. I got to find my quarter. Maybe we can find one of they balls. Here. Here they is. Way over yonder. See." He came to the fence and pointed his arm. "see them. They aint coming back here no more. Come on."

We went along the fence and came to the garden fence, where our shadows were. My shadow was higher than Luster's on the fence. We came to the broken place and went through it.

"Wait a minute." Luster said. "You snagged on that nail again. Cant you never crawl through here without snagging on that nail."

*Caddy caught me and we crawled through. Uncle Maury said to not let anybody see us, se we better stoop over, Caddy said. Stoop over, Benjy. Like this, see. We stooped over and crossed the garden, where the flowers rasped and rattled against us. The ground was hard. we climbed the fence, where the pigs were grunting and snuffing. I expect they're sorry because one of them got killed today, Caddy said. The ground was hard, churned and knotted.*

*Keep your hands in your pockets, Caddy said. Or they'll get froze. You don't want your hands froze on Christmas, do you.*

"It's too cold out there." Versh said. "You dont want to go out doors." (2 -3)

The speaker displays a unique and limited vocabulary, since "Flower spaces" or "flower tree" are not conventional English terms. Their meaning is nevertheless comprehensible.

The phrasing is simple and laconic "they stopped and we stopped." The first proper name introduced is that of "Luster," but the reader has no idea who this is or what his relationship is to the narrator. Benjy's section lacks any explanatory passages. The reader is forced to make inferences and to supply the missing explanations. The first two sections of The Sound and the Fury thus fall into the category of what Roland Barthes calls "writerly" texts.

In spite of Benjy's inability to clearly express himself, he is able to report verbatim the speech of others, which is clearly delimited by quotation marks, and attributed to the speaker. He has no conception of golf as a game. All he sees is the activity at its most primitive level. His vocabulary does demonstrate an attempt at classifying and characterizing his perceptions according to a vocabulary which is particular to him : "hitting little" is his understanding of putting. Here again, the limited vocabulary compels the reader to interpret or to decipher a kind of code.

This may explain why the first two sections of the novel are often cited as being difficult to understand. Benjy is a thirty-three year old with the mind of a three year old. His narrative is characterized by a limited vocabulary, or an invented one, and an inability to distinguish between present and past sensations. The structure of his section mimics the overall structure of the novel. His thoughts switch unexpectedly between perception and memory, between present and past, to such an extent that it becomes very difficult for a reader to distinguish the "present" of the narration:

We went along the fence and came to the garden fence, where our shadows were My shadow was higher than Luster's on the fence. We came to the broken place and went through it.

"Wait a minute." Luster said. "You snagged on that nail again. Cant you never crawl through here without snagging on that nail."

*Caddy uncaught me and we crawled through. Uncle Maury said to not let anybody see us, so we better stoop over, Caddy said. Stoop over, Benjy. Like this, see. We stooped over and crossed the garden where the flowers rasped and rattled against us. The ground. was hard. We climbed the fence, where the pigs were grunting and snuffing. (2 - 3)*

This initial analepse is marked by italics, but such is not always the case in this novel.

Faulkner's use of italics in this respect is far from systematic. The purpose of italics (as he later explained it in response to a question asked by one of his students at the University of Virginia), was only to alert the reader that such shifts are characteristic of Benjy's thought:

"I had to use some method to indicate to the reader that this idiot had no sense of time.

That what happened to him ten years ago was just yesterday. The way I wanted to do it

was to use different colored inks, but that would have cost so much, the publisher couldn't undertake it."<sup>46</sup>

The temporal shift, when it is not marked by italics, is indicated only by the unexplained change in setting and characters. Rather than Benjy following Luster along the edge of the pasture in the summer, it is his sister Caddie who accompanies him across frozen ground. Then the italics end, and in the next paragraph the setting has again abruptly switched to the inside of a house, and someone named Versh speaks. While Faulkner initially uses italics to alert the reader to such shifts, the change in setting, mentions of colder weather and Christmas, or a sudden change in the names of his guardians are sometimes the only signals of such a shift. The presence or absence of italics remains inexplicable. They are ultimately the inexpressible remainder of Benjy's difference, his position *outside* of expression, of the linguistic economy.

The sight of the candles on his birthday cake evokes another memory of fire: "You cant blow out no candles" Luster said. "Watch me blow them out." He leaned down and puffed his face. The candles went away. I began to cry. "Hush." Luster said. "Here. Look at the fire while I cuts this cake." *I could hear the clock, and I could hear Caddy standing behind me, and I could hear the roof. It's still raining, Caddy said. I hate rain. I hate everything. And then her head came into my lap and she was crying, holding me, and I began to cry. Then I looked at the fire again and the bright, smooth shapes went again. I could hear the clock and the roof and Caddy.*

I ate some cake. Luster's hand came and took another piece. I could hear him eating. I looked at the fire.

Benjy's thoughts lack any expressions of intentionality or emotions. His is a voice which simply observes and reports what it sees, as if it were disconnected from its own body, an impartial witness to its own actions. He is content merely to sit and watch the fire in the stove, until Luster closes the oven door:

A long piece of wire came across my shoulder. It went to the door, and then the fire went away. I began to cry.

"What you howling for now." Luster said. "Look there." The fire was there. I hushed. (69)

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<sup>46</sup> *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957 - 1958*, eds. Joseph Blotner and Frederick L. Gwynn (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1959) 4. All Further references to this text will be noted parenthetically with the abbreviation FIU.

From Benjy's point of view, things *happen* with no apparent warning or explanation: "Luster's hand came and took another piece;" Things "go away" and "come back" inexplicably: "A long piece of wire came;" "the fire went away;" "I began to cry;" "I hushed" The speech and actions of the self are presented in the same tone of impartial observation. The "I" is not a willing, intentional participant in his environment, but an impartial observer. When he burns himself, Benjy reports without affect even the sound of his own wailing as if it were a detached object.

I put my hand to where the fire had been.  
"Catch him." Dilsey said. "Catch him back."

My hand jerked back and I put it into my mouth and Dilsey caught me. I could still hear the clock between my voice. Dilsey reached back and hit Luster on the head. My voice was going loud every time."

"Get that soda." Dilsey said. She took my hand out of my mouth. My voice went louder then and my hand tried to go back to my mouth, but Dilsey held it. My voice went loud. She sprinkled soda on my hand. (71 - 72)

Affect can be inferred only from the images and memories which recur. Benjy begins to cry when he hears the golfer calling for his caddie. In the opening pages, his crying after hearing the word "caddie" can only be understood when we discover that the name of his sister is Candace, or "Caddy." His feelings toward his sister are in no way distinguished from his feelings toward fire, which he likes to watch, and the disappearance of which causes his emotional outburst. In Benjy's case, rather than emotion it would almost be suitable to speak of psychological reaction.

Benjy's response is the same when he recalls the sight of his mutilated genitalia in a mirror (after Jason has had him castrated): "*I got undressed and I looked at myself, and I began to cry. Hush, Luster said. Looking for them aint going to do no good. They're gone. You keep on like this, and we aint going have you no more birthday. He put my gown on. I hushed*" [. . .] (90). Benjy "remembers" his actions and the actions and words of others only in their most obvious outward appearance, but he is incapable of understanding the reasons for any of them, even those that are related to his affection for his sister, Caddy. Motivations are

never mentioned, even in speculation, moreover, there is nothing to indicate that he is able to distinguish what is a memory from what is the present, ongoing, moment, and this is, then, the difficulty which the reader, too, will have. There is effectively no privileged frame of reference for making such distinctions

One of the motifs which distinguishes Benjy's patterns of thought are the images which recur. It is his fixation upon certain details—shapes, colors and odors—which mark his difference, his particularity. He is particularly sensitive to odors. In the opening pages, he is not concerned with the game the men are playing, but by the movement. His attention is attracted by the flag flapping on the green, and the bird flying across his field of vision, and he watches the actions the men accomplish: hit ball, sit at table, walk further. He is equally sensitive to the words of those closest to him, and notes them each in turn, demonstrating that our own deepest memories involve the language, the visions, of others.

The movement of Benjy around the remains of the Compson property, and the wandering of his thoughts from present to past, are mirrored in Quentin's section of the same novel, where we follow him as he wanders around the Harvard campus and the surrounding countryside. His thoughts are also marked, although to a somewhat lesser extent, by this uncontrolled movement between various past moments and the present.

#### Quentin Compson: Temporal Consciousness

The Sound and the Fury, As I lay dying, are Absalom, Absalom! are considered by many to be the finest examples of Faulkner's use of the stream of consciousness technique. These are the novels which problematize, more than any of his others, the stability of consciousness in their main narrating voices. Quentin Compson's voice, in his section of The Sound and the Fury, might well be characterized as schizophrenic: It is full of the voices of others: his father, but also his mother, Caddy, Dalton Ames, Bland, and Shreve. Likewise, in Absalom, Absalom! he is repeating tales that he has internalized, that he has heard from his father and Miss Rosa, who were also repeating second-hand information.

The second section of The Sound and the Fury begins with an unidentified narrative voice which immediately establishes a precise temporal setting: "When the shadow of the sash appeared on the curtains it was between seven and eight oclock and then I was in time again." The mimetic voice establishes its focus upon the present moment, the *now*, by its concern with establishing a precise point of departure. The "now" here is established simultaneously as an already has been, since the verb is in the past tense: "it was [already] between seven and eight oclock." It is the morning, yet symbolically it is not on sunlight but on the shadow that he focuses. Here, unlike in Proust, where much of the text is spent slowly suggesting the fuzzy continuum which connects sleep and waking, Quentin Compson snaps into time from the absolute other of consciousness, from the silence of "notlanguage" (a term Quentin uses in Absalom, Absalom!). Sleep is a death for Quentin, and one which he spends much of his waking time dreaming about.

From the start he is fixated on the passing of time, and the beginning of his section of The Sound and the Fury is explicitly formulated in terms of an entry into time, as if time were a container, or a space from which one could escape. Quentin's entry into time is also an entry into language, as it is the moment when his narrative begins.

When the shadow of the sash appeared on the curtains it was between seven and eight oclock and then I was in time again, hearing the watch. It was Grandfather's and when Father gave it to me he said, Quentin, I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; it's rather excruciating-ly apt that you will use it to gain the reducto absurdum of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his or his father's. I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it. Because no battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools. (93)

His father's voice is one of the most significant echoes in Quentin Compson's thoughts on June Second 1910. The gift of the grandfather's timepiece is equivalent to a condemnation. Mr. Compson's advice to Quentin is, as John T. Irwin puts it, "hardly the kind of exhortation to dare and accomplish great things that one would expect a father to give his



son on graduation day.”<sup>47</sup> Instead, his father's words are a constant reminder that “no battle is ever won.”

If Faulkner believes that the artist can shape time, Mr. Compson's words to Quentin are quite the opposite, and might explain why Quentin has no thoughts of being an artist. Quentin frequently recalls the cynical, defeatist attitude of his father: “bad health is the primary reason for all life. Created by disease, within putrefaction, into decay” (SF 52 - 3). It is the repetition of these memories, of the father's pronouncements, which betray their profound effect on Quentin, and explain his morbid obsession with the passing of time: “It's always the idle habits you acquire which you will regret, Father said that: That Christ was not crucified: he was worn away by a minute clicking of little wheels” (94).

Mr. Jason Richmond Compson III, Quentin's father, is described in the appendix to The Sound and the Fury as “bred for a lawyer,” [. . .] “a sort of privileged pseudo-Daniel Boone-Robinson Crusoe, who had not returned to juvenility because actually he had never left it,” who “sat all day long with a decanter of whiskey and a litter of dogeared Horaces and Livys and Catulluses, composing (it was said) caustic and satiric eulogies on both his dead and his living fellowtownsmen” (409 - 10). Mr. Compson is a figure of the artist as cynic, producing insignificant verse that no one will read. Miss Rosa Coldfield is another figure for the artist, producing an antiquated form that no one will read, as she is said to have written “over a thousand odes” to the defeated confederate soldier.

Quentin demonstrates his desire to escape time, to stop its flow, in his highly symbolic gesture of tearing the hands off of the watch his father gave him. His thoughts will reveal the reason for this wish: He is acutely aware of a sense of loss, and with the impossible desire to restore or preserve something that is already gone. He is obsessed with

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<sup>47</sup> Irwin views Quentin's relationship with his father in The Sound and the Fury as a form of role reversal . It is Mr Compson's failure as a father, according to Irwin, embodied in his philosophy that “nothing is even worth the changing of it,” which obliges Quentin to assume the role of the father in relation to his own father, exhorting him to avenge his daughter's honor: “As Mr. Compson's father was a failed general, so Mr Compson is a failed lawyer—an alcoholic nihilist who revenges himself on his father for that psychological castration that has left him with the feeling that nothing can be done, by passing on to his son that same sense of inescapable failure, defeat and impotence.” Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975) 67-68.

the idea of avenging his sister's honor, and is haunted by the loss of the Compson estate for which he feels responsible, since his parents have sold the pasture so that he could spend a year at Harvard. For Quentin, as for Benjy and Marcel, the experience of time is above all the experience of loss.

In spite of his father's words, or perhaps because of them, Quentin is obsessed with timepieces. As much as he seeks to forget about the passing of time, he remains keenly aware of it. He constantly notes the length of his shadow, the slanting light, and the chiming of the campus clocks. He passes a clock shop and stops in to inquire if any of the models on display has the correct time, and he is alert to the chiming of the campanile on the Harvard campus. He is even attentive to the attention that other people pay to their timepieces:

Shreve stood in the door, putting his collar on, his glasses glinting rosily, as though he had washed them with his face. "You taking a cut this morning?"

"Is it that late?"

He looked at his watch. "Bell in two minutes." (95)

Quentin's section of the novel is, as a whole, more coherent than Benjy's, in that the "present" of the action is clearly established. This is due partly to the fact that the action that takes place occurs in and around Cambridge, Massachusetts. Scenes consisting principally of dialogue, involving the members of the Harvard community, his roommate Shreve or the Kentuckian Gerald Bland, are more easily distinguished from the analepses involving Benjy, Caddy and Mr. Compson. When memories occur, though, they are less easily distinguished from one another, it is in these passages that Quentin's section most closely resembles that of Benjy. A particularly illustrative moment of this occurs in his fight with fellow student Gerald Bland in Cambridge (183 - 203).

In an episode which transposes the triangular relationship between Quentin, Caddy and her lover, he befriends a little girl whom he addresses as "sister." The girl's brother accuses Quentin of kidnapping her. He is picked up from the sheriff's station by Mrs. Bland, with Gerald, Spoade and Shreve. As they ride in Mrs. Bland's car, she begins

talking about Gerald's grandfather, and Quentin's thoughts switch from the present moment to memories of the past

The narrative switches abruptly from a mode in which dialogue is clearly marked, to a stream of consciousness technique, signaled by italics

"Did you ever drink perfume?" Spoade said. *with one hand he could lift her to his shoulder and run with her running Running.*

"No Shreve said. *running the beast with two backs and she blurred in the winking oars running the Swine of Euboeus running coupled within how many Caddy.*

"Neither did I," Spoade said. *I dont know too many* (184)

As in the first section of the novel, the italics here are one signal that a flashback is occurring. The memory of earlier conversations are intermixed with images of Caddy and her lover, associated with the smell of honeysuckle. It is ultimately impossible to determine whether these are images that Quentin saw, or whether they are creations of his overactive imagination, provoked by his conversation with Caddy about her lovers.

*Caddy did you love them When they touched me I died*  
one minute she was standing there the next he was yelling and pulling at  
her dress they went into the hall and up the stairs (186)

Different moments are juxtaposed within the same line of text. Sentences are begun and then interrupted by others, only to be resumed later in mid-phrase. This technique is suggestive of a simultaneity of thought. Quentin seems to be remembering several events and conversations simultaneously. Another significant characteristic of the stream of consciousness technique, is the difficulty of determining the proper referent for pronouns. In the above passage, it requires an effort on the part of the reader to determine to whom the pronoun "he" refers. It is only through the reader's familiarity with the behaviour of Benjy Compson that this can be determined.

The encounter with Caddy's lover is presented in a text marked by a lack of punctuation and capitalization that might distinguish phrases and sentences from one another. The reader is forced to rely entirely on the logical coherence of subject and verb:

we reached the fence she crawled through I crawled through when I  
 rose from stooping he was coming out of the trees into the grey toward us  
 coming toward us tall and flat and still even moving like he was still she  
 went to him

this is Quentin Im wet Im wet all over you dont have to if you dont  
 want to

their shadows one shadow her head rose it was above his on the sky  
 higher their two heads

you dont have to if you dont want to

then not two heads the darkness smelled of rain of damp grass and  
 leaves the grey light drizzling like rain the honeysuckle coming up in damp  
 waves I could see her face a blur against his shoulder he held her in one arm  
 like she was no bigger than a child he extended his hand

glad to know you (SF 192)

In this passage, dialog is not clearly attributed to specific speakers. While it is apparently Caddy who introduces Quentin to Dalton Ames, it is unclear who says “Im wet Im wet all over.” This passage closely resembles the language of Benjy in its laconic syntax and in the imagery of the two children moving about the Compson land. (“we reached the fence she crawled through I crawled through”).

It is unclear what “you” dont have to do “if you dont want to.” The lack of punctuation or attribution of quotations are further characteristics of the stream of consciousness technique which make it difficult to attribute enunciations to characters. The interiority of thought eliminates the need for such indications, and distinguishes it from narrative based on the communicative model of oral or written storytelling. This lack of punctuation continues for ten pages in which Quentin’s thoughts echo bits and pieces of conversations with Caddy about her pregnancy, and her lover, as well as Quentin’s meeting with, and his threats and his clumsy attempt to punch Dalton Ames. The text then returns to the “present” time frame, resuming on the afternoon of June 2, 1910. Quentin’s nose is bleeding, and Shreve asks him why he tried to hit Bland. This fight with Bland is a scene which is presented only through Quentin’s subsequent re-living of it. Spode has to tell Quentin what he has apparently just lived through but of which he apparently has no memory.

"The first I knew was when you jumped up all of a sudden and said, 'Did you ever have a sister? did you? and when he said No, you hit him. I noticed you kept on looking at him, but you didn't seem to be paying any attention to what anybody was saying until you jumped up and asked him if he had any sisters.'" (206)

That the flashbacks to conversations and images of Caddy are what as he attacked Bland, Quentin seems to have been re-living an earlier encounters with Dalton Ames in Jefferson. The question echoes the one he remembered asking Caddy's lover after confronting him and insisting that he leave town.

did you ever have a sister did you  
no but theyre all bitches  
I hit him my open hand beat the impulse to shut it to his face his  
hand moved as fast as mine the cigarette went over the rail I swung with  
the other hand he caught it too before the cigarette reached the water he  
held both my wrists in the same hand his other hand flicked to his armpit  
under his coat behind him the sun slanted and a bird singing somewhere  
beyond the sun we looked at one another while the bird singing he turned  
my hands loose  
look here (199)

The two identical questions also lead the reader to assume that Quentin was thinking about his confrontation with Caddy's lover during his assault of Gerald Bland.

Though more clearly framed in the present than Benjy's narrative, the above example illustrates how Quentin does not live entirely in the present. In his fight with Gerald Bland, he re-lives a fight with Dalton Ames. Even in his fight with Ames, he is strangely attuned, not to what he is doing, but to the singing bird and the slanting sun.

#### Involuntary Memory and the Olfactory

While there seems to be no overt involuntary memory mechanisms at work the way the sensation of a piece of cake dipped in tea, or the narrators' stumbling on uneven paving stones brings to consciousness Marcel's forgotten memories, Faulkner's novels do seem to evoke an "involuntary" memory akin to Proust's. In The Sound and the Fury, for example, Quentin and Benjy's perceptions and memories of their sister Caddy are infused with the sensation of certain odors. Just as he is attentive to color and movement, Benjy is particularly sensitive to odors. He can "smell" Caddy's sickness (75). Caddy and Quentin

smell “like rain.” (80), and Caddy smells “like trees” (88). Benjy is upset when Caddy’s usual odor is altered by the perfume she was given by Dalton Ames.

Quentin’s memories of Caddy are likewise associated with the odor of honeysuckle,<sup>48</sup> and in Absalom, Absalom! he is attentive to the smell of Mr. Compson’s cigar along with that of honeysuckle and the summer wisteria, which comes to be associated with the events narrated by his father and Miss Rosa. Miss Rosa expounds a theory of memory which bears a striking resemblance to Proust’s involuntary memory in its valuation of sense perception, particularly the olfactory as she too recalls her own “summer of wisteria.”

*Once there was—Do you mark how the wistaria, sun-impacted on this wall here, distills and penetrates this room as though (light-unimpeded) by secret and attritive progress from mote to mote of obscurity’s myriad components? That is the substance of remembering—sense, sight, smell: the muscles with which we see and hear and feel—not mind, not thought: there is no such thing as memory: the brain recalls just what the muscles grope for: no more, no less: and its resultant sum is usually incorrect and false and worthy only of the name of dream [. . .]*  
(AA 178)

Here as in Proust, sense perception is the catalyst of memory and has a very powerful influence on the nature of the memory evoked. The purely contingent presence of the odor during the initial experience, comes to stand for the memory in an essential way, as metaphor.

Quentin’s thoughts are also heavily affected by his father’s words, and by odors, or by the memories of certain odors; but in contrast to Benjy, he is emotionally affected by those odors and those memories. Unlike Benjy, Quentin is able to reflect on his own non-existence in the moment of involuntary recall, “where all stable things become shadowy paradoxical:”

Benjy’s memories are completely involuntary, thus mechanical. He is not able to relate one moment to the other or to reflect on the existential status of the past. He has no

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<sup>48</sup> (SF 160, 185, 186, 190, 191, 192, 193, 195, 210, 211)

use for the past tense. His memories do not belong to him, when the past becomes present it completely obliterates all sense he might have of the present.

When it bloomed in the spring and it rained the smell was everywhere you didn't notice it so much at other times but when it rained the smell began to come into the house at twilight either it would rain more at twilight or there was something in the light itself but it always smelled strongest then until I would lie in bed thinking when will it stop when will it stop [. . .] Sometimes I could not put myself to sleep saying that over and over until after the honeysuckle got all mixed up in it the whole thing came to symbolize night and unrest I seemed to be lying neither asleep nor awake looking down a long corridor of grey half-light where all stable things had become shadowy paradoxical all I had done shadows all I had felt suffered taking visible form antic and perverse mocking without relevance inherent themselves with the denial of the significance they should have affirmed thinking I was I was not who was not who was not was not who. (SF 210 - 211)

Quentin postulates his existence here as a chiasmus of negation. In what might be called a "Proustian" moment, he expresses this lack of being in the nether-world of consciousness "neither asleep nor awake." Since he is unable to fulfill the role he thinks he should have assumed as male heir to the Compson domain his actions are "without relevance," and come back to "mock" him.

Just as he blames himself for his inability to defend the honor of his family by protecting the virginity of his sister, Quentin cannot come to terms with the violation of the land represented by the loss of the pasture. The Compson domain has been altered by the country club which has erected a fence and made the pasture into a golf course (where, in Benjy's words, men "hit"). The "virgin" swampland which Thomas Sutpen is said to have "outraged" in Absalom, Absalom! is another figure for the loss of the values of the Old South in the impurity and senselessness of modern life.

Quentin's narrative is cerebral and contemplative, the episodes which he remembers all somehow involve his indecision and inability to act, to assume the role he envisions for himself of his sister's protector, the role of the father. The character of Quentin Compson is Faulkner's version of T.S. Eliot's Prufrock, confronted with a state of affairs in which the code of honor which he wants to follow is no longer respected. At the

end of Absalom, Absalom! he tells Shreve “I am older at twenty than a lot of people who have died” (AA 469).

### Existentialist Faulkner

Lewis P. Simpson has argued that Faulkner’s work, like much of Southern literature from about 1920 to 1950, tends to suggest that “the process of the destruction of memory and history [. . .] cannot be halted” and that the “inauguration of any attempt to establish a new literary covenant with the past is futile and that the only meaningful covenant for the latter-day writer is one with the self on terms generally defined as existential.” The stream of consciousness technique, while seemingly revealing the “inner” thoughts of a character, explains nothing. The significance of images and words reflected in Quentin’s thoughts appears only in their repetition and juxtaposition, in the relationships which become decipherable in the phenomenon of consciousness.

Quentin’s section is marked by the repetitive or obsessive memories of the odor of honeysuckle, or the name of Caddy’s boyfriend, Dalton Ames, as he obsessively recalls his failure to defend her honor in his fight with the man he suspects to be the father of her child. The alternation of stream of consciousness techniques with more straightforward narrative and dialogue is similar to the technique used in Absalom, Absalom! As in Quentin’s section of The Sound and the Fury, there is a frame narrative in which consists of the events of the summer of 1909, in which Quentin listens to Miss Rosa and then Mr. Compson telling what they know of the Surpen legend, and as in the former novel, passages in which speakers are clearly indicated by quotation marks and enunciations are specifically attributed to particular characters, alternate with long portions of text in which it is not entirely clear who is speaking.

### Time and Memory in Absalom, Absalom!

It is a the desire for coherence and consistency which rivets Yoknapatawpha’s (and the reader’s) attention on the story of Thomas Surpen and his children. As in Proust, the way the book is set up, nothing (or relatively little) in fact “happens.” What happens is the



act of narration itself, as it is taken up by first one, and then another character. The events are related have already happened. It is a question of constructing a stable, coherent, logical narrative out of disparate fragments which do not all make sense to the storytellers. There are a certain number of events which are well-known to them, and in later volumes Faulkner even provided a chronology to help the reader, but no one narrator is capable of telling it all. The text is continually coming and going between different moments in the Sutpen story as each of the narrators tries to make sense of them.

Absalom, Absalom! does not present itself as an autobiographical novel in the same way the Proust's does. It does not make extensive use of first person narration, but the characters themselves engage in acts of narration. While the novel is chiefly concerned with Thomas Sutpen and his activities in Yoknapatawpha county, it is in many ways the story of a story, the story of its telling: In some brief passages, Faulkner shows us the thoughts of Quentin, as in the second chapter of The Sound and the Fury, but for the characters of Miss Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, or Shreve, it is not so much their immediate perceptions which are portrayed, but the way the narrators *speak* the stories they tell, their emphasis or vocabulary, thus their use of language, which give clues as to the nature of their thought processes. What is portrayed are their different uses of language and signs.

Jean-Paul Sartre claims that "a novelistic technique always reveals the novelists's metaphysics. The critic's task is to grasp the latter before he can appreciate the latter."<sup>49</sup> The style of Faulkner novels suggest personal identity through the idiosyncratic ways that thought perceives and organizes the world. The only way to gain access to this perception and organization is through language. This is the lesson that Faulkner seems to have gleaned from his own readings of Continental authors, including Proust.

The narrator of the Recherche is extremely attentive to the ways in which others use language. He takes pleasure in mocking Françoise's mispronunciations when, indignant

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<sup>49</sup> "une technique romanesque renvoie toujours à la métaphysique du romancier. La tâche du critique est de dégager celle-ci avant d'apprécier celle-là" (Situations I, 71).

over the narrator's feigned mocking attitude toward the death of his aunt: «Je ne sais pas m'exprimer», je triomphais de cet aveu avec un bon sens ironique et brutal digne du docteur Percepied, e si elle ajoutait: «Elle était tout de même de la parentèse, il reste toujours le respect qu'on doit à la parentèse», je haussais les épaules et je me disais: «Je suis bien bon de discuter avec une illettrée qui fait des cuirs pareils» (S 152). "I dont know how to *express* myself," I would gloat over her admission with an ironical and brutal comon sense worthy of Dr. Percepied; and if she went on: "all the same she was kith and kindle; there's always the respect due to kindle," I would shug my shoulders and say to myself "It's really very good of me to discuss the matter with an illiterate old woman who makes such howlers"(I: 168).

Genette, in considering the use of language by various characters in Proust's novel, notes that "just about all of them present at least sometimes erratic linguistic traits, faulty, dialectical or socially marked expressions, acquisitions or characteristic borrowings, misuses, mispronounciations or revealing ellipses. [. . .] none of them escapes, save perhaps for the hero himself, who speaks very little as such, and whose role is rather one of observation, apprenticeship and decipherment."<sup>50</sup> Genette concludes that this stylistic autonomy does not finally constitute substantial, determined characters in the way previous realist authors did. Far from compensating the transitory psychology of their character, their language often accuetnuates and aggravates it.<sup>51</sup> All of Proust's characters are, like Albertine, «êtres de fuite» (202-03). Dezon-Jones concurs with Genette in her assessment that "with Proust the very notion of the creation of novelistic characters with stable, fixed identities has disappeared in favor of the description of variable, impressionable consciences," "avec

<sup>50</sup> "à peu près tous présentent au moins à quelque moment quelque trait erratique de langage, tournure fautive ou dialectale, ou socialement marquée, acquisition ou emprunt caractéristique, gaffe, bourde ou lapsus révélateur, etc. [. . .] aucun d'eux n'échappe, si ce n'est peut-être le héros lui-même, qui d'ailleurs parle fort peu comme tel et dont le rôle est plutôt d'observation, d'apprentissage et de déchiffrement." (201).

<sup>51</sup> "l'autonomie stylistique [n'aboutit] pas chez Proust à la constitution de *personnages* substantiels et déterminés au sens réaliste du terme. On sait combien les «personnages» proustiens restent, ou plutôt deviennent au fil des pages de plus en plus indéfinissables, insaisissables, «êtres de fuite», et l'incohérence de leur conduite en est évidemment la raison essentielle [. . .] mais la cohérence hyperbolique de leur langage, loin de compenser cette évanescence psychologique, ne fait bien souvent que l'accentuer et l'aggraver." (Genette 202 - 03).

Proust, la notion même de création de personnages de romans fixes, stables, s'effaça au profit de la description de consciences variables et impressionables," (25). This identity crisis is not limited to the narrator. It plagues all of the inhabitants of the Proustian universe. In the case of Faulkner's novels, she likewise affirms that "even more than characters, it is a series of temporal consciences" which are presented (100). Quentin Compson a good example of such a temporal consciousness.

In the Compson novels, Faulkner strictly delimits the time of the narrative. We have already seen the precision with which Faulkner situates the narrative time in the four sections of The Sound and the Fury. In Absalom, Absalom! the time between Quentin's first meeting with Miss Rosa Coldfield (the sister of Ellen Coldfield who was Sutpen's wife in Yoknapatawpha county), and his final retelling of the story to Shreve McCannon is confined to a precise 9 month period in the Summer and Winter of 1909, but the novel begins *in medias res*; Quentin is rehearsing a story that he already knew. As he is preparing to attend Harvard in the late summer of 1909, he is summoned by Miss Rosa Coldfield to listen to her tell her version of Sutpen's story. In the early pages of the novel, Quentin is at pains to discover why she has chosen *him* to listen to what seems to be her confession of complicity with this man.

Much of the first few chapters consist of Quentin listening to the tale told first by Miss Rosa and then Mr. Compson, in Jefferson, while, in the latter half of the novel, Quentin reconstructs the story with Shreve in his Harvard dorm room. Mr Compson, Miss Rosa, Quentin and Shreve take their places in a line of storytellers that begins with Sutpen himself, on the occasion of his discussion with Quentin's grandfather, General Compson). If the same story is told more than once, and by different storytellers, it is never twice told in quite the same way.

At the same time that Quentin, Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson are attempting to piece together the portrait of Thomas Sutpen, the language they use and the stories they tell oblige the reader to make inferences about their own identities. The way material is

organized, the types of associations which structure the narrator's discourse are perceived to bear the traces of an individual consciousness, but any attempt to represent the workings of consciousness in narrative gives rise to all sorts of problems involving not only language, memory and sense perceptions, but also history, science and epistemology. It presupposes that language is capable of "representing" something other than itself, or that the term "consciousness" refers to some state of being or pattern of thought preexisting language, and that it could somehow be represented in language.

#### Voice, Voices

Michael Millgate argues that the narrative style of the various narrators in Absalom, Absalom! is "more distinct than has usually been allowed," and that "It is fair to speak of the story as having three main narrators. Miss Rosa Coldfield and Mr. Compson are narrators in their own right, projecting distinct interpretations" of the Sutpen story which are "deeply colored by the relationship in which they stand to him and by their own particular qualities of character and personality." Millgate distinguishes in Miss Rosa's account "with its 'demonizing' and linguistic extravagance [. . .] the violence and verbal frenzy—action larger than life-size, language pushed beyond its proper limits—of decadent Jacobean drama" (153), whereas Mr. Compson, "much less involved, much cooler and more skeptical in his assessment of Sutpen and of the world at large, concentrates his attention on different aspects of the story and treats them in quite a different manner. He identifies Mr. Compson's rhetoric with an "effete disenchantment: suggestive of the literary decadence of the *fin de siècle*" with the "self-conscious estheticism of an Oscar Wilde or Beardsley (154). In accordance with his portrayal of the tale as a tragedy, Mr Compson insists that it was Sutpen's pride which was his downfall, while Quentin will paradoxically attribute it to "innocence." The way the story is told emphasizes the workings of memory and perception on the part of the Quentin as he is alternatively telling, listening to, or imagining, the story.

While it is sometimes possible to associate certain rhetorical stances with Miss Rosa or Mr. Compson, at other times the various voices which narrate become indistinguishable one from another. N. Blake argues that the narrating voices tend to merge into one “overvoice:” “The voice, in Faulkner’s text, exists as an irrefutable overwhelming presence.” While admitting the possibility of distinguishing among the book’s various speakers, Blake takes as his working hypothesis that all the narrators are “simply mouthpieces for a voice that is unique, singular and indivisible [. . .]. The voice is really anonymous” (*Intertextuality* 130). To speak of an omniscient narrator is misleading, for although there are passages of the text written in the third person which tell us, for example, what Quentin thinks and feels, “Whatever her reason for choosing him [. . .] the getting to it, Quentin thought, was taking a long time” (AA 11), such passages are relatively few.

In the first paragraphs, we get a summary of the story in Quentin’s thoughts in which we see him internalizing the words of Rosa Coldfield:

he would seem to listen to two separate Quentins now—the Quentin Compson preparing for Harvard in the South, the deep South dead since 1865 [. . .] and the Quentin Compson who was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost [. . .] the two separate Quentins now talking to one another in the long silence of not people, in notlanguage, like this: *It seems that this demon—his name was Sutpen—(Colonel Sutpen)—Colonel Sutpen. Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation—(Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—tore violently. And married her sister Ellen and begot a son and a daughter which—(Without gentleness begot, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—without gentleness. Which should have been the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age, only—(Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something. And died)—and died. Without regret, Miss Rosa Coldfield says—(Save by her) Yes, save by her. (And by Quentin Compson) Yes. And by Quentin Compson.* (AA 5 - 6)

The multiple repetitions and corrections indicate the provisional nature of oral knowledge, and give an indication of what is to follow: the different, sometimes conflicting, and ultimately unverifiable stories about Thomas Sutpen’s family and plantation. The condensed version of the events of the Sutpen narrative is only the first of the many re-

tellings in the novel. If Proustian narrative is characterized by the iterative mode, in which repeated events are summarized in one instance of narration, the narration of Absalom, Absalom! is characterized by repetition. The same events will be the subject of multiple tellings in the course of the novel.

In the logic of the Yoknapatawpha saga, this moment of splitting presages the fractured inner discourse of Quentin's final day in The Sound and the Fury. Since the latter novel appeared first, the reader is in the position of Quentin himself, "listening [. . .] to one of the ghosts which had refused to lie still even longer than most had, telling him about old ghost-times" (AA 5). The splitting and doubling of the narrator, the listener and the characters in the story they are telling and being told sets up a play of mutually reflecting mirrors which cannot help but implicate the reader, much as the evocation of the insomniac hero reading in bed does in Proust's initial paragraph.

Quentin has evidently internalized the story being told by Miss Rosa, even before the reader has heard it. This passage displays a nearly schizophrenic splitting of Quentin's thoughts, and the introduction of another, seemingly omniscient voice ("two separate Quentins now talking to one another").

The second chapter of the novel begins in seemingly omniscient mode, telling of the "legend" of Sutpen's arrival in the county in the 1830's. "He had apparently come into town from the south—a man of about twenty-five as the town learned later, because at the time his age could not have been guessed" (35). The information being conveyed in this passage is communal. It is the limited, sometimes speculative knowledge passed along in the gossip among the inhabitants of Yoknapatawpha. Mid-way through this chapter, the text switches to direct quotation of Mr. Compson, who will narrate the rest of the chapter to Quentin. The third-person narrator is deprived of any status as "omniscient," not only because it is mostly absent, but also by what might be termed the relentlessly "dialogical" or polyphonic nature of the text. There is a proliferation of voices in the novel, not just those of Miss Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, or Shreve, but also the absent voices of Quentin's

grandfather, and of other witnesses and townspeople who have over the years supplied various elements of the ongoing narrative. The “overvoice” in Absalom, Absalom! is anonymous, displaying the communal nature of oral knowledge, and could be thought of as schizophrenic. In the latter half of the book, as Quentin and Shreve tell each other the story, Faulkner dramatizes the splicing together of different points of view in the ongoing process of narration. Rather than tending toward clarity of voice, the momentum of the narration drowns individual voices in a sea of citiationality.

The coon-hunter Akers, who is said to have stumbled upon one of Sutpen’s “wild negroes” is a representative of one of many people of Jefferson who may have gotten some information about the man: “the men who would ride out to watch what was going on, who began to tell how Sutpen would take stand beside a game trail with the pistols and send the negroes in to drive the swamp like a pack of hounds [. . .]. There were many more than Akers, though the others were responsible citizens and landowners and so did not have to lurk about the camp at night” (AA 41) Thus nearly everything that is told about Sutpen is rooted in this communal story.

The community which perpetuates the Sutpen “legend” or the Sutpen “mystery” is the one which collectively produces the discourse. The principal speakers in the narration which occurs in the years 1909-1910 include the sole remaining “eyewitness” to some of the events, in the person of Rosa, as well as the descendants of Sutpen’s first (and seemingly unique) Yoknapatawpha county friend: General Compson. But information also comes from others, especially in the one section of the book where an unidentified third person narrator relates Thomas Sutpen’s arrival and first few years in Yoknapatawpha. There are several scattered witnesses to sightings of Sutpen, and a few rare occasions on which the entire town is witness to his actions. He makes brief taciturn appearances to court and marry Ellen Coldfield, but otherwise turns his back on the community. Living twelve miles away on Sutpen’s Hundred, all the town can know of him is innuendo. While the latter part of this chapter, in quotes, is attributed to Mr. Compson, we may or may not attribute

the first part to him; the nature of the information remains more or less “communal,” therefore, as Faulkner might say, “apocryphal.”

The act of (re)telling the story to Shreve in the latter part of the novel becomes a catalyst for Quentin’s involuntary loss of self, finally provoking a profound psychological identification with his father, and with Sutpen. The telling of the story thus serves to efface all difference between its object and the various agents of its perpetuation. So strong is his identification with the figures in the Sutpen legend that, in the course of his storytelling sessions with Shreve in their Harvard dormitory, the acts of reminiscence and narration trigger a vertiginous loss of identity, apparent in Quentin’s thoughts. He seems to lose his sense of being an individual in the process of storytelling, identifying with Henry Sutpen, or his father:

*Yes, we are both Father. Or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us. (AA 326 - 27)*

This doubling of the narrating subject is As Weinstein has noted (referring to John Irwin’s study Doubling and Incest), “the process of vicarious identification is rampant. Rosa and her identification with Judith and Charles’s courtship, Henry and his shifting triangular identifications with Judith and with Bon (mergers in which the clarity of sexual difference itself seems to dissolve), Sutpen’s identification with the planter in the big house, Wash Jones’s identification with Sutpen, Quentin and Shreve’s identifications with Henry and Charles; in each of these crossings an involuntary psychic merger takes place” [. . .].<sup>52</sup>

Why did Faulkner choose return to the character of Quentin Compson, first introduced in his earlier novel, on the day of his suicide, in order to tell the story of Thomas Sutpen, the uneducated man from Appalachia whose establishment of a plantation and family in Yoknapatawpha County are the concern of the narrators? In interviews,

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<sup>52</sup>Weinstein continues with an observation that is central to my argument: “Individual identity here remains poignantly incomplete [. . .] Revising each finished version of its characters’ identity with another version, the novel melts down whatever it has consolidated” [...] (93). This statement holds true as well for the continual revision at work in “Marcel’s” story.



Faulkner implied that he was merely looking for a mouthpiece to tell the story, and that the main character in Absalom, Absalom! was Sutpen, but it is also a novel about Quentin Compson, whose grandfather was Sutpen's first Yoknapatawpha county friend. And in its intertextual relationship to The Sound and the Fury, the Sutpen story seems intimately related to the tragic end of the Compson Clan.

In a conference he gave in May, 1958 at the University of Virginia, Faulkner attributed an autobiographical function to storytelling when he was asked whether the Quentin Compson of Absalom, Absalom! was supposed to be the same character who appeared in The Sound and the Fury, "a man thinking about his own Compson family [and] his sister." Faulkner responded that Quentin approached the Sutpen family "with the same opthalmia that he approached his own troubles" (FIU 274).

Faulkner said that Absalom, Absalom! was Sutpen's story, despite the fact that Quentin is a central character in it,

it's Sutpen's story. But then, every time any character gets into a book, no matter how minor, he's actually telling his biography—that's all anyone ever does, he tells his own biography, talking about himself, in a thousand different terms, but himself. (FIU 275)

While Faulkner is ostensibly referring to the character of Quentin as a storyteller, his choice of language invites an interpretation whereby *every* character in a narrative is to be read as a figure for the author himself. Instead of saying "every time a character tells a story," Faulkner attributes the very constitution of characters as the establishment of so many mirrors for the author.

If Absalom, Absalom! is, as Faulkner claimed, Sutpen's story, it is also the story of Quentin Compson and William Faulkner. The exemplary nature of the Sutpen story is suggested by Quentin, who postulates "it took Thomas Sutpen to make all of us."

Readers of The Sound and the Fury know that Quentin has no future, but continually re-lives the past. Sartre noted this in his comparison of Proust and Faulkner: "It would seem that we can compare Faulkner's vision of the world to that of a man seated in a convertible facing backwards. At each moment shadows appear to his right and to his left [. . .] which only a little while after become trees, men, cars, with distance."<sup>53</sup> The novel begins with Quentin "listening" to Miss Rosa Coldfield, but he is not listening. He has heard versions of the Sutpen story numerous times, he is more concerned with discovering why he must be subjected to it *yet still again*:

*It's because she wants it told he thought so that people whom she will never see and whose names she will never hear and who have never heard her name nor seen her face will read it and know at last why God let us lose the war (AA 8).*

Quentin's conversations with his father subsequent to Rosa's narrative are dramatized in the second and third chapters. He is concerned to know why she should have summoned him to accompany her to Sutpen's hundred. Mr Compson suggests that perhaps she holds Quentin guilty by association, since his grandfather was Sutpen's first friend in Yoknapatawpha county.

We learn that he has heard the story innumerable times. Later on, as he retells the story to Shreve his thoughts reveal his weariness at the incessant rehashing of the same incidents in the story:

*Am I going to have to hear it all again he thought I am going to have to hear it all over again I am already hearing it all over again I am listening to it all over again I shall have to never listen to anything else but this again forever so apparently not only a man never outlives his father but not even his friends and acquaintances do (AA 345 - 46)*

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<sup>53</sup>Il semble qu'on puisse comparer la vision du monde de Faulkner à celle d'un homme assis dans une auto découverte et qui regarde en arrière. A chaque instant des ombres surgissent à sa droite, à sa gauche, papillottements, tremblements tamisés [...] qui ne deviennent des arbres, des hommes, des voitures qu'un peu plus tard, avec le recul. Le passé y gagne une sorte de surréalité: ses contours sont durs et nets, immuables; le présent, innomable et fugitif, se défend mal contre lui; il est plein de trous, et, par ces trous, les choses passées l'envahissent, fixes, immobiles, silencieuses comme des juges ou comme des regards" (73 - 4)

The very repetitiveness of Quentin's thoughts suggests a static, unchanging story in which the same thing is continually repeated. His expression of weariness with an act of narration which is repeated over and over again in the book is simultaneously a commentary on the form of the novel itself. The repetition with difference of narrative suggests the infinity of possible interpretations and arrangements of the scant pieces of the Sutpen puzzle, but also implies the futility of any attempt to artificially limit or master the flux of time and reality:

*Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed, let this second pool contain a different temperature of water, a different molecularity of having seen, felt, remembered, reflect in a different tone the infinite unchanging sky, it doesn't matter: that pebble's watery echo whose fall it did not even see moves across its surface too at the original ripple-space, to the old ineradicable rhythm (AA 326)*

Quentin employs images here which evoke an infinitude of potential or actual complexity, an infinite connectedness. It is significant that the images he chooses are precisely those inspiring the recent models of complex interactions hinted at by studies of fluid dynamics. The unlimited potential for dilation and revision inherent in narrative is a manifestation of what "fractal geometry" knows as infinite recursiveness. Likewise, the self-reflexivity and self-similarity of the mise en abyme is akin to the self-recursiveness and similarity among the many patterns found in natural systems and mimicked by models of fluid dynamics.

As a result of his excursion to Sutpen's Hundred with Miss Rosa, Quentin seems to be the beneficiary of supplemental information about Charles Bon's African-American blood. This supplemental knowledge allows Quentin to assume mastery of the narrative, thus taking the place of his father when he comes back to tell Mr. Compson what he found at the Sutpen place. Mr. Compson's efforts are to resurrect the past through the

voluntary act of storytelling. He is frustrated by the difficulty of making a complete, coherent story out of the fragments of memories and narratives about Thomas Sutpen.

In Absalom it is remarkable that, although he provides the focus for the novel's point of view, Quentin is the only one of the narrators who is unable to sustain the act of narration. In the chapters in which he is the principle narrator, he is progressively interrupted by his Canadian roommate Shreve, who finally appropriates the story and tells it himself. Quentin's inability to tell the story amounts to an inability to tell any story, his or anyone else's, to the bankruptcy of narrative discussed by Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Storyteller," where he asserts that "today the communicability of experience is decreasing" (86-87). Quentin's ultimate inability to express himself is evident at the very end of the novel where, in response to Shreve's question "Why do you hate the South?" all Quentin can do is rather obsessively deny this hatred: "*I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*" (AA 471). He remains powerless to assert his identity in anything other than a negative mode. It is the end of this novel which helps explain his disjointed narration in The Sound and the Fury.

Quentin's efforts to establish a definitive version of the story are doomed to failure because of the multiple and conflicting voices which feed his own discourse. The fracturing and dispersal of the narrative voice also serves to suggest the different discourses which come together to structure consciousness. Quentin's voice is situated at a nodal point between those of his grandfather, his father, Rosa Coldfield, Thomas Sutpen, and the whole community of Jefferson, all of whom contribute, in one form or another, to the Sutpen legend, which is described as "part of his twenty years' heritage." We are told that "his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth" (AA 9). The "omniscient" narrator here makes explicit a symbolic level on which Quentin will serve as a representative of the whole South, of the Confederacy, and eventually of all mankind.

If at times the various narrating voices are virtually indistinguishable from one another, at others the “individual” voices become fractured, as when, at the very beginning of Absalom, Absalom! Quentin’s consciousness splits itself into two voices which, carrying on a dialogue with himself, as he listens to Miss Rosa tell the Sutpen story, as if he had heard it already a thousand times. It is suggested that he *has* heard it for years, that it is part of his “birthright,” his heritage. Yet the scene is supposed to be taking place on the afternoon that Quentin is summoned to hear the story for the first time. How are we to take this exchange between two nearly identical voices? Is it a flash-forward to a moment in time when Quentin will have heard the story in its entirety? The hesitant character of the exchange, with its repetitions and corrections suggests the uncertainty of the facts. Sutpen is not a man but a “grim ghost” haunting Rosa’s language “where a more fortunate one would have had a house” (AA 4).

Why does Sutpen not have a house? Why is he exiled into the world of endless discourse, of narration? For that is perhaps the ultimate question and the final irony for this man who so obstinately refused to speak. Sutpen’s appearances in the town of Jefferson are marked by his silent passage.

So they would catch him, run him to earth, in the lounge between the supper table and his locked door to give him the opportunity to tell them who he was and where he came from and what he was up to, whereupon he would move gradually and steadily until his back came in contact with something—a post or a wall—and then stand there and tell them nothing whatever as pleasantly and courteously as a hotel clerk. (AA 38)

Sutpen refuses textuality at all turns, insisting only on his own “design,” (though we cannot be sure if this is the way he puts it, since all we know of him comes through the townsfolk, the Compsons, or Miss Rosa). He refuses to supply a narrative of himself to the townfolk who lie in wait for him so as to corner him and force him to talk, to tell them who he is, where he comes from and what he’s up to.

If Sutpen avoids committing himself in conversation, it is because his singular goal is to have the final word, the only word that matters. He intends to leave his “mark”

through the perpetuation of his name by his children. Thus the imposition of a name is a significant aspect of his attempt at writing his own story. The other main way in which Sutpen attempts to control his story is through the tombstones which he has engraved, save for the dates and which he carries around with him during the war:

“He bought them himself,” Mr Compson said “He bought the two of them while the regiment was in Virginia, after Judith got word to him that her mother was dead. He ordered them from Italy, the best, the finest to be had—his wife’s complete and his with the date left blank: and this while on active service with an army which had [. . .] the highest mortality rate of any before or since [. . .].” (AA 236 - 37).

Quentin imagines the scene of the wagon accompanying Sutpen’s regiment with the two-thousand pound stones:

that much bombastic and inert carven rock which for the next year was to be part of the regiment, to follow it into Pennsylvania and be present at Gettysburg, moving behind the regiment in a wagon driven by the demon’s body servant through swamp and plain and mountain pass, the regiment moving no faster than the wagon could. (AA 237)

The stones come to represent Sutpen himself for the starving men of the regiment, who refer to them as Colonel and Mrs Colonel. This absurd process is literally an attempt by Sutpen to control the final word, to possess closure and carry it around with him. He would like to create his own monument, his own identity, independently from the voices of others. Ironically his taciturn nature and the seemingly inexplicable event of the son’s renunciation of his birthright leaves him open to the speculation of innumerable others.

Throughout Faulkner’s novel, Mr. Compson, Miss Rosa, and Shreve, but especially Quentin, as well as the reader himself, are preoccupied with putting all the pieces of the story together in order to make it whole, ordered and understandable. Each storyteller has a different approach to the characters and events, a different relationship to the story being told, and each version has its own blind spots. Mr. Compson’s story is influenced by his father’s friendship with and knowledge about Sutpen; it is equally enriched by Mr. Compson’s education as a classicist, while Miss Rosa’s is filtered

through her sister, Sutpen's second wife, and through her own education as a woman in the rural South in the late nineteenth century. She characterizes Sutpen as a "demon," while Mr. Compson prefers to see him as a victim of Fate.

Faulkner's novels incorporate multiple voices in order to suggest the ways in which consciousness is dependent on the interplay of many different discourses, and that this interplay is an unstable, contingent, ever-changing process of negotiation, involving repetition and revision. The narrators of these novels, like Sutpen talking to Quentin's grandfather, are not talking about themselves, they're just telling stories, but it is the ways in which they tell their stories which end up telling us about themselves.

In the Recherche the hero learns the cultural significance of appearances and gestures, of signs, and the role they play in constituting social and personal identities. As Proust demonstrated the power of art to create the real for the young Marcel, in Faulkner's novels, the internalization of culturally determined systems of representation is shown through the importance accorded to memories of others' speech, of storytelling. In Proust's novel the number of discursive positions and their ideological overdeterminedness is more overtly presented, from the reactionary and anti-semitic positions of the Parisian nobility, represented by the Guermantes, to the "Dreyfusism" of Bloch, from the medieval legends of the narrator's youth, to Brichot's etymologies. The assumption of such discursive stances serves to define individuals and nations, that is why the anti-semitic furor of the Dreyfus affair became an issue of national security, yet the arbitrariness of such attitudes is demonstrated by the ease with which they are discarded and replaced.

That Basin de Guermantes is an anti-Dreyfusard seems to conform to the narrator's image of him as a representative of one of the great aristocratic families of Paris, but in Sodome et Gomorrhe we learn that his colleagues are shocked by his sudden reversal of position. By changing his position on this crucial issue, his figure undergoes a transformation in their eyes. This transformation is mediated by a theatrical, artistic

milieu in which three “charming little women” convince him that there was never any evidence against him. Rather than by logic and reason, they sway him by charm and finally by decree “Les trois charmantes dames trouvaient qu’il n’allait pas assez vite et le rudoyaient un peu: «Mais au fond personne d’intelligent n’a pu croire qu’il y eût rien». [. . .] Le duc était rentré à Paris dreyfusard enragé.” Marcel concludes that many countries behave like such men of sincerity, “beaucoup de pays qu’on a laissés remplis de haine pour un peuple et qui, six mois après, ont changé de sentiment et renversé leurs alliances” (SG 138). In the Recherche, the behavior of individuals mirrors and prefigures the behavior of governments and nations. The importance of the impersonal symbolic field of language is shown through the coercive power of artistic and linguistic representation.

The frustration of the various speakers in Absalom, Absalom! at their inability to fully understand the mystery of the son’s renunciation of his birthright, flight, and eventual murder of his sister’s fiancé, or the murder of the father by his own farm hand, is expressed by Mr. Compson, who laments: “It is just incredible. It just does not explain [. . .] We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames out of some now incomprehensible affection which sound to us like Sanskrit or Choctaw” (124). The impassioned attempts of the narrators to understand the mystery of the man named Sutpen is here likened to the attempt to decipher a difficult language. The choice of Sanskrit and Choctaw is interesting for a number of reasons. Sanskrit is a written language while Choctaw is from an oral tradition, but both are also languages associated with non-Western traditions. These spiritual languages are opposed to the mysterious and sinister language of Sutpen’s Haitian slaves, which Mr. Compson equates in their incomprehensibility.



In Absalom, Absalom! as in The Sound and the Fury, the chronology, the link of causality has been broken, so the story cannot be told from beginning to end. It is not completely understood by the people of Yoknapatawpha. All they have is the murky in-between of unknown, known and inexplicable. The chronology of the plot is scattered, dispersed throughout the narrative. As in Proust, the story is revealed episodically, and as each episode is evoked, the storyteller explores its relations to other episodes at other moments of the protagonists' lives. Michael Millgate has suggested that "one way of looking at the book's structure is to think of it as organized about a number of crucial moments of recognition, truth, disillusion: Henry and his father in the library, Henry shooting Bon, Sutpen proposing to Rosa, Wash Jones murdering Sutpen—each moment presented in a kind of tableau arrested at a particular point of time and held in suspension while it is looked at, approached from all sides, inspected as if it were itself an artifact, like that Grecian urn which Faulkner so often invoked elsewhere" (164).

While Proust's novel presents itself as a kind of autobiography, a first person recounting of the narrator's own life, in Absalom, Absalom! the narrators are concerned with someone else's story; but the story of Thomas Sutpen also carries personal significance for Quentin Compson, just as Swann's does for Marcel. This is especially evident in his retelling of it, in the context of his Harvard Dorm room, to his Canadian roommate. We are told that Shreve's request was not the first time that Quentin had been asked to describe or explain the South's difference to other inhabitants of the Harvard community: "not Shreve's first time, nobody's first time in Cambridge since September: *Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there? Why do they live at all?*" (AA 218). The insistence of this line of questioning indicates the exemplary status Quentin holds in Massachusetts as a representative of the South.

Shreve continually refers to Rosa as Quentin's "Aunt Rosa" and is repeatedly corrected. The vehemence with which Quentin denies her kinship belies the very real ties

that bind him to her, if only because they are neighbors in such a small Mississippi town. To Shreve, the Northerner, for whom Jefferson Mississippi is as imaginary as Paris or Haiti, they may as well be family. Quentin is thus called upon not only to explain life in the South, but to justify its very existence. The story of Thomas Sutpen thus becomes emblematic of something fundamental, specific to Southern culture, which remains irreducible, some difference or remainder which eludes the comprehension of even the native Southerner. As Shreve struggles to understand the South he mimics the desire of the residents of Yoknapatawpha County themselves—Quentin, his father and Miss Rosa—in their struggle to understand the Sutpen story, and all of these characters thus become stand-ins for the reader of the novel itself.

Wait. Listen. I'm not trying to be funny, smart. I just want to understand it if I can and I dont know how to say it better. Because it's something my people haven't got. Or if we have got it, it all happened long ago across the water and so now there aint anything to look at every day to remind us of it. We dont live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves (or have I got it backward and was it your folks that are free and the niggers that lost?) and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forget. What is it? Something you live and breathe in like air? a kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago? A kind of entailed birthright father and son and father and son of never forgiving General Sherman, so that forevermore as long as your childrens' children produce children you wont be anything but a descendant of a long line of colonels killed in Pickett's charge at Manassas?

"Gettysburg," Quentin said. "You cant understand it. You would have to be born there."(AA 450 - 451)

Quentin subsequently admits to Shreve that perhaps he doesn't understand it himself after all. It is only Shreve, the outsider, who must explain the significance of his story to Quentin.

In the context of the novel, this "remainder," or this difference specific of Southern culture, is the difference of Southern culture to itself—its irreducible remainder, the one which it would like to suppress and eliminate, namely, its intimate relationship to Afro-American culture.

The story they are telling involves several well-defined temporal strata, going back as far as Sutpen's boyhood encounter with a slave at the door of a plantation house in Virginia, His appearance in Jefferson in 1833, and, in-between, the story of his renunciation of his first wife and the loss of her father's plantation to a slave revolt in Haiti. These and other episodes constitute the Sutpen narrative, but there are large gaps in this story. These gaps contribute in no small measure to the Sutpen mystery and constitute a large part of the novel's preoccupations.

There are resemblances between the descriptions of the settings, of the contexts in which the story is told. Despite the obvious differences in climate and temperature, they are all described in terms of stillness and death:

From a little after two oclock until almost sundown of the long still hot weary dead September afternoon they sat in what Miss Coldfield still called the office because her father had called it that-a dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers because when she was a girl someone had believed that light and moving air carried heat and that dark was always cooler, and which (as the sun shone fuller and fuller on that side of the house) became latticed with yellow slashes full of dust motes which Quentin thought of as being flecks of the dead old dried paint itself blown inward from the scaling blinds as wind might have blown them. (AA 3)

The Harvard dormitory room in which Quentin and Shreve rehash the Sutpen story is similarly portrayed:

the two of them not moving except to breathe, Both young, born both within the same year: the one in Alberta, the other in Mississippi, born half a continent apart yet joined, connected after a fashion in a sort of geographical transubstantiation by that Continental Trough, that River that runs not only through the physical land [. . .] (AA 322)

It is a letter from his father which also brings the memories of the sensations of that summer into the Massachusetts winter:

Then on the table before Quentin, lying on the open text book beneath the lamp, the white oblongs of envelope, the familiar blurred mechanical *Jefferson Jan 10 1910 Miss* and then, opened, the *My dear son* in his father's sloped fine hand out of that dead dusty summer where he had prepared for Harvard so that his father's hand could lie on a strange lamp-lit table in Cambridge; that dead summer twilight—the wisteria, the

cigar-smell, the fireflies—attenuated up from Mississippi and into this strange room, across this strange iron New England snow. (AA 217)

In Absalom, Absalom! the narrators are all concerned with restoring memory, and thus of overcoming time. The novel is, from the beginning, cast in the fading light of remembrance (“From a little after two o'clock until almost sundown of the long still hot weary dead September afternoon”). The stillness of the scene in Rosa Coldfield's father's office, and the slow fade of the summer afternoon comments ironically on the immobility of Faulkner's prose, in which the action, the verb itself, seems never to come. “From a little after two o'clock until almost sundown of the long still hot weary dead September afternoon” action is never fully predicated, instead being continually impeded by the interminable description and accumulation of adjectives (“long still hot weary”). When the reader finally reaches the verb, it is not action, but stasis, as “they sat.” Such language is characteristic of “decadent” literature, in which the hero spends long periods in contemplation unable or unwilling to act. Such novels, then devote large passages of text to descriptions. Description is, to be sure, a necessary technique of realist fiction, in which a detailed setting conveys the necessary foundation, setting the scene for the novel's action. But there is little action in Absalom, Absalom!, at least at the first diegetic level of Miss Rosa, Quentin and Mr. Compson's narrative acts. The stasis of the narrative illustrates the inability of the characters to overcome time, to “get past” the facts of Sutpen's story, and to overcome the weight of Southern history.

## Chapter 4: The Social Kaleidoscope

This question posed by Proust's narrator about the possibility of immortality ("mort à jamais?"), is the ultimate question about identity, whether or not there is some immutable core, a soul or an essence which might survive the ultimate demise of the individual. In patriarchal society the perpetuation of the father's name is meant to guarantee a kind of immortality, but Proust's novel takes as one of its themes the mobility of the proper name, from one family to another, from one person to another. The narrator is intrigued by names, and especially by old aristocratic names, especially if they are mentioned in works of art or literature.

The decline of the French nobility is one of the major sociological themes of the novel. The narrator is initiated into the life of Parisian aristocracy through a series of receptions, at the salons of the Duchess of Guermantes, Mme Verdurin and finally the Princess of Guermantes in Le temps retrouvé. The rise to eminence of Mme de Verdurin, a simple bourgeoisie is accomplished through a fortuitous alliance which makes her the new Princess of Guermantes. This movement is seen as part of a continual change which the narrator refers to as the "social kaleidoscope."

Although the narrative seems to set out to tell the story of an individual, the "individual" is continuously shown to be inhabited by a multitude of selves. The Recherche seeks at times to catalog this multitude, to depict the different "worlds" which the hero frequents, but it also shows that what is usually thought of as the individual incorporates thoughts, experiences and lessons learned from diverse sources. The portrait of French society of the Belle Époque in the Recherche is inextricably related to the portrayal of *being*, a particular being in a particular place and time. To tell the story of the self, then, an entire universe must be established, incorporating the multiple worlds which make up the self. The novel begins with the narrator's naive view of a society segmented and held apart in rigid hierarchies, and ends with the ultimate discovery of the fluidity of ranks and values.

The overestimation of the proper name is characteristic of Proust's naïve hero. The narrator's first reflections on the power of words involves a proper name: that of the local aristocratic family, the Guermantes.<sup>54</sup> As with many of the characters and places in the novel, the first thing that the hero knows is a name or an image, a representation, which then becomes the object of speculation and imagination. The affective power that this name will have for the hero can be traced back to the troubling projections of the magic lantern placed in his childhood bedroom. The superimposition of its images on the walls of his room, like the illusions of the dream states described in the opening pages, substitutes, "à l'opacité des murs d'impalpables irisations, de surnaturelles apparitions multicolores, où des légendes étaient dépeintes comme dans un vitrail vacillant et momentané" (S 9), "it substituted for the opaqueness of my walls an impalpable iridescence, supernatural phenomena of many colors, in which legends were depicted as on a shifting and transitory window" (I: 9).

The projections of his magic lantern represent Geneviève de Brabant, ancestor of the present day Duchesse de Guermantes, standing on a moor in front of her castle, "lost in contemplation," unaware of the approach of Golo "filled with an infamous design." The suggestive power that names hold for the hero is due in part to their *sound*. The name Brabant suggests the golden color of the castle and landscape to the young hero *even before he saw them*: "Le chateau et la lande étaient jaunes et je n'avais pas attendu de les voir pour connaître leur couleur car, avant les verres du chassis, la sonorité mordorée du nom de Brabant me l'avait montré avec évidence" (S 9) "The castle and the moor

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<sup>54</sup> Roland Barthes has pointed out a major symbolic structure of the *Recherche* in the opposition of the long vowel endings of prestigious names like Guermantes, Laumes and Agrigente, to the short, abrupt endings of names such as Verdurin, Cottard and Legrandin (132). Serge Dubrovsky claims that this is an example of Proust's "reactionary" side: "C'est toute l'histoire de France qu'on saisit dans le vocable *Guermantes*, comme toute la vulgarité juive dans *Bloch* ou le porte-à-faux dans *Swann*, snob et dreyfusard, dont le nom se prononce de 2 manières. La surestimation du Nom est un choix idéologique, où se livre le côté «réactionnaire» de Proust." We shouldn't forget, however that the hero is depicted as naïve, not yet having benefitted from the lessons of time and not yet having experienced the revelation of *Le temps retrouvé*. This is the essential difference to be drawn between the "hero" and the "narrator."

were yellow, but I could tell their colour without waiting to see them, for before the slides made their appearance the old-gold sonorous name of Brabant had given me an unmistakable clue" (I: 10). The aristocratic families of the Recherche are fascinating to the narrator above all because of their names, they are the counts of Combray, possessing Combray in the middle of their names "First among the citizens of Combray" they are the only ones who do not live there (S 170). Although they don't have a house there, they are everywhere.

In his initial encounter with representation, it is the unsettling intrusion of mystery and otherness, of death, which interrupts the anesthetizing influence of habit, of familiarity and brings the hero painfully to life, returning thought and sensation.

Certes je leur trouvais du charme à ces brillantes projections qui semblaient émaner d'un passé mérovingien et promenaient autour de moi des reflets d'histoire si anciens. Mais je ne peux dire quel malaise me causait pourtant cette intrusion du mystère et de la beauté dans une chambre que j'avais fini par remplir de mon moi au point de ne pas faire plus attention à elle qu'à lui-même. L'influence anesthésiante de l'habitude ayant cessé, je me mettais à penser, à sentir, choses si tristes. (S 10)

And, indeed, I found plenty of charm in these bright projections, which seemed to emanate from a Merovingian past and shed around me the reflections of such ancient history. But I cannot express the discomfort I felt at this intrusion of mystery and beauty into a room which I had succeeded in filling with my own personality until I thought no more of it than of myself. The anesthetic effect of habit being destroyed, I would begin to think—and to feel—such melancholy things. (I: 10-11)

The importance of historical fictions in the formations of the young hero's sense of social values and identities can be seen in this legend which the hero internalizes and learns to associate with the Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes. The room here is the equivalent of the hero's self—an empty space onto which history is projected. Unlike the older narrator, awakening from slumber in a room he cannot identify, the young hero does not have to isolate his surroundings from memories, but from superimposed images and "Merovingian tales." They become part of his own memories, thus part of his childhood. The tale of Geneviève de Brabant is a legend of persecuted innocence in the hagiographic

vein. The image of the persecuted female is clearly associated with his mother: “que les malheurs de Geneviève de Brabant me rendaient plus chère, tandis que les crimes de Golo me faisaient examiner ma propre conscience avec plus de scrupules” (S 10), “whom the misfortunes of Geneviève de Brabant had made all the dearer to me, just as the crimes of Golo had driven me to a more than ordinarily scrupulous examination of my own conscience” (I: 11). He learns to associate the figures in the magic lantern with the “intrusion of mystery and beauty” into his room/self. It comes as no surprise then that the hero should project these same images onto the “real” Duke and Duchess of Guermantes once he has learned that they are also dukes of Brabant. Most significantly, his infatuation with the Duchesse is the first movement in the continual metonymic displacement of his desire for his mother onto other female figures, including Mme Swann, Mlle de Stermaria, and Albertine.

The hero’s fascination with nobility and with the Merovingian past, a romanticized image of the French ancien régime, idealizes the aristocracy as embodying something essentially French. His desire is to possess the key to the mystery of what he wants to think of as the innate charm and desirability of the Guermantes. This mystery is embodied, or so he thinks, in the quasi-magical power of the name. In some essence which it embodies or distills, and will play a role in his desire for the Duchesse.

Their castle becomes for him the unattainable goal of his childhood walks:

*jamais non plus nous ne pûmes pousser jusqu’au terme que j’eusse tant souhaité d’atteindre, jusqu’à Guermantes. Je savais que là résidaient des châtelains, le duc et la duchesse de Guermantes, je savais qu’ils étaient des personnages réels et actuellement existants, mais chaque fois que je pensais à eux, je me les représentais tantôt en tapisserie [. . .] tantôt de nuances changeantes [. . .] tantôt tout à fait impalpables comme l’image de Geneviève de Brabant [. . .] que la lanterne magique promenait sur les rideaux de ma chambre [. . .] enfin toujours enveloppés du mystère des temps mérovingiens et baignant comme dans un coucher de soleil dans la lumière orangée qui émane de cette syllabe «antes». (S 169)*

Nor could we ever get as far as that other goal which I so longed to reach, Guermantes itself. I knew that it was the residence of the Duc and



Duchesse de Guermantes, I knew that they were real personages who did actually exist, but whenever I thought about them I pictured them either in tapestry, like the Comtesse de Guermantes in the "Coronation of Esther, which hung in our church, or else in iridescent colors [ . . . ] or again altogether impalpable, like the image of Geneviève de Brabant, ancestress of the Guermantes family, which the magic lantern sent wandering over the curtains of my room or flung aloft upon the ceiling—in short, invariably wrapped in the mystery of the Merovingien age and bathed, as in a sunset, in the amber light which glowed from the resounding syllable "antes." (I: 187)

The existence of these idealized beings so close to Combray surprises him, and is one of the hero's first lessons in the fallability of his own perceptions when the sight of the real duchess conflicts with the image the hero had previously associated with the name Guermantes. He is at first unable to reconcile his imagined representation of the Duchess with the flesh and blood woman before him:

Ma déception était grande. Elle provenait de ce que je n'avais jamais pris garde quand je pensais à Mme de Guermantes, que je me la représentais avec les couleurs d'une tapisserie ou d'un vitrail, dans un autre siècle, d'une autre matière que le reste des personnes vivantes. (S 172)

My disappointment was immense. It arose from my not having borne in mind, when I thought of Mme de Guermantes, that I was picturing her to myself in the colours of a tapestry or a stained glasswindow, as living in another century, as being of another substance than the rest of the human race. (I: 190 - 91)

In order to get over this deception he recalls to himself the stories he has absorbed, which tell of the Guermantes' illustrious ancestors:

«Glorieux dès avant Charlemagne, les Guermantes avaient le droit de vie et de mort sur leurs vassaux; la duchesse de Guermantes descend de Geneviève de Brabant. Elle ne connaît, ni ne consentirait à connaître aucune des personnes qui sont ici.» (S 173).

"Great and glorious before the days of Charlemagne, the Guermantes had the right of life and death over their vassals; the Duchesse de Guermantes descends from Geneviève de Brabant. She does not know, nor would she consent to know, any of the people who are here today." (I: 192)

The young Marcel tries desperately to reconcile his illusory image of what the Duchess ought to look like with the reality of the person present before him. In a characteristic move, he projects his image of the Duchess onto the face he sees before him, thus

shrinking from the flesh and blood truths of lived reality, or rather, appropriating them to his narrative version of it. This move prefigures the one at the end of the novel when Marcel will finally leave the world, go into his room and begin writing.<sup>55</sup> The same terms, “une grande déception,” are used to describe the hero’s first experience of a theatrical performance by the great actress “La Berma” in A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs (17).

Much later on in the novel, he will learn one of the scandalous secrets of the Guermantes: that they are just as much German nobility as they are French. This discovery, along with the decline in fashionableness of the Duchesse de Guermantes, contribute significantly to the loss of prestige of the maison de Guermantes in the hero’s eyes. His disillusion with regard to the passing of what had seemed to be immutable values contributes as much as anything to his eventual stay in a sanatorium in Le temps retrouvé. The narrator’s discovery of a path at Combray which connects what he had thought to be separate realms, the “coté de Méséglise” and the “coté de Guermantes,” equally destroys the reassuring symmetry of the two opposing sides which corresponds to the young hero’s naive belief in the clear-cut separation between good and evil, and between the aristocracy and the rest of society.

### The Pastoral Tradition

Another link which can be seen between the lost time of Marcel Proust and the obsession with the past of Faulkner’s narrators is the sense of loss expressed in both authors as a longing for an idealized past embodied as a rural or agrarian ideal. Lewis Simpson and Michael Grimwood have both discussed Faulkner’s links with the pastoral tradition: “insofar as he typically chose to write about people who worked with their hands rather than with their minds,” says Grimwood, “he was a pastoralist. For pastoralism has always thrived on the infatuation of intellectuals and artists with the imagined joys of physical labor.” While the Sutpen and the Compson families could

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<sup>55</sup> This is also a figure for the flesh and blood novelist, who spent the last decade of his life enclosed in a cork-lined room.

hardly be called representatives of pastoral values, the loss of the Compson pasture and the violence which is said to have been inflicted upon the land by Sutpen are examples of how Faulkner's novels dramatize a sense of loss or transgression which plagues the intellectual Quentin.

Sutpen's fate, or punishment, was perhaps sealed by the way he "violently tore" his plantation from the "virginal" swampland. The building of the Sutpen plantation is thus described as a rape of the land. His acquisition of the property is likewise said to have been the fruit of some secretive, underhanded deals.

Sutpen's appearance in Yoknapatawpha is all the more sinister to the inhabitants of Jefferson because of the presence of Haitian slaves with whom Sutpen works side by side, caked in mud to ward off mosquitoes: "[. . .] the negroes could speak no English yet and doubtless there were more than Akers who did not know that the language in which they and Sutpen communicated was a sort of French and not some dark and fatal tongue of their own" (36). The slaves themselves seem to have been focus of much speculation among Yoknapatawpha citizens. This is due in no small measure to Sutpen's promiscuity with them. He joins them in the physical labor, plastering himself with mud to avoid mosquitos just as they do, and boxing with them.

In The Sound and the Fury, Quentin's thoughts reveal a sense of guilt about the loss of the land in exchange for his one year at the university (95, 116, 127, 154). The literal loss of the pasture is symbolic of the loss of values associated with the Old South. The sale of the Compson pasture enables Quentin to leave the agrarian south for intellectual pursuits at Harvard.

#### Pastoral Proust

Proust's novel could also be read in its relationship to the pastoral tradition. One of the fundamental oppositions in Proust's novel is between the values associated with the country, with life in the *provinces*, and those displayed in the more cosmopolitan circles of the Parisian salon society. In "Combray," his grandmother extolls the virtues of nature,

and encourages the young child to engage in physical activities which his feeble health precludes. The hero remembers being read “François le champi,” a novel whose characters and themes deal with rustic life.

As Paul De Man has pointed out in his analysis of the reading scene in Du côté de chez Swann, the tension between these two realms forms the central conflict in the young Marcel’s life. This can be seen in his desire to claim for his intellectual activities, reading and writing, the values ascribed by his grandmother to exercise, and country air. DeMan discusses this in depth in his Allegories of Reading: “the confinement to the obscure, private existence of inward retreat turns out to be a highly effective strategy for the retrieval of all that seemed to have been sacrificed. The text asserts the possibility of recuperating, by an act of reading, all that the inner contemplation had discarded, the opposites of all the virtues necessary to its well-being: the *warmth* of the sun, its *light* and even the *activity* that the restful immobility seemed to have definitively eliminated” (59-60). The pastoral virtues associated with the warmth and light of the sun are associated with the bourgeois ideal of activity, that is to say *industry*.

The narrator describes himself as forever fantasizing about young peasant women, whether they be milkmaids spied from a train window, or the chambermaid of the Baroness Putbus. The desire for pastoral virtues, like search for lost time, is a quest for a lost paradise. One of the major concerns of Proust’s narrator is loss: the loss of his grandmother, of Albertine, of his own memories, and finally, the loss of his sense of loss in the slow progression of forgetfulness which he traces in Albertine disparue. In Le temps retrouvé, the narrator is forced to conclude that “les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu’on a perdus” “the true paradises are those which have been lost” (177).

In Faulkner’s novels, the character’s obsession with the past, their inability to let it die projects an image of the antebellum South as a pre-lapsarian paradise. The Sound and the Fury reveals that one of the thoughts which is at the root of Quentin’s inner conflicts is that of the pasture which his idiot brother loved and which was sold so he

could spend one year at Harvard. Quentin's going off to Harvard represents a turning away from the Southern heritage. This is driven home in Absalom by his relationship to his Canadian roommate at Harvard. The South here is literally recontextualized, as Quentin's new context changes the nature of his relationship to the Northern other and to the other in general.

The reader has seen in The Sound and the Fury, that Quentin is hounded by the thought that he has a duty which he cannot fulfill. His thoughts return incessantly to his sister Caddy, and thus his family's honor, and his failed attempt to fight Dalton Ames, whom he perceived as having befouled that honor. Quentin is obsessed by the need to follow a code of honor, but is unable to act. Some critics have speculated that this loss of power to act is attributable to the castrating effect of the Compson women, first Mrs Compson, then Caddy. This code of honor is a vestige of a value system which is no longer in effect.

Unlike the Proustian narrator, Quentin never shows any sign of a desire for some kind of philosophical truth or conclusion. Instead, he seems merely to seek an end, relief from his obsessions, from his sense of obligation to defend the honor of his sister, and from the oppressive past of Southern history. In Absalom, Absalom! he is from the start, tired, weary of hearing the same story over and over again.

During Proust's lifetime the prestige and privileges of the aristocracy were being eroded, by educational and governmental systems based on merit or by social status based on wealth rather than birthright. The social status accorded to the former Mme Verdurin when she becomes the new Princesse de Guermantes, negates all the significance that the hero has invested in the aristocratic name. Gilles Deleuze has pointed out the emptiness of the gestures and signs emitted in the Verdurin's salon, which is portrayed almost as a cult, obeying a strict, if unspoken, code, with its rituals and its displays. Mme Verdurin is described as an accomplished actress and stage director as she emits signs which serve as signals for her "faithful" "rien de drôle n'est dit

chez Mme Verdurin, et Mme Verdurin ne rit pas; mais Cottard fait signe qu'il dit quelque chose de drôle, Mme Verdurin fait signe qu'elle rit, et son signe est émis si parfaitement que Monsieur Verdurin, pour ne pas être inférieur, cherche à son tour une mimique appropriée" "Nothing funny is said in Mme Verdurin's salon, and she doesn't laugh; but Cottard indicates that he has said something funny, and Mme Verdurin displays signs of laughter. Her sign is so perfectly promulgated that Monsieur Verdurin in turn seeks an appropriate mimicry so as to avoid seeming inferior." In the bourgeois salon of the Verdurins, the sign "anticipe l'action comme la pensée, annule la pensée comme l'action, et se déclare suffisant," "anticipates action as it does thought, annuls them both, and declares itself sufficient."<sup>56</sup> The world of the bourgeois salon is a world devoid of substance, an endless play of empty signifiers.

As Roland Barthes explains in his analysis of Balzac "Sarrasine:" "La différence qui oppose la société féodale à la société bourgeoise, l'indice au signe est celle-ci: l'indice a une origine, le signe n'en a pas; passer de l'indice au signe, c'est abolir la dernière (ou la première) limite, l'origine, le fondement, la butée, c'est entrer dans le procès illimité des équivalences, des représentations que rien ne vient plus arrêter, orienter, fixer consacrer" (*S/Z* 47). "The difference which opposes feudal society to bourgeois society, the index to the sign, is this: the index has an origin; the sign does not. To move from the index to the sign is to abolish the last (or the first) limit, the origin, the foundation, the goal; it is to enter into the unlimited process of equivalencies, of representations that nothing can any longer stop, orient or consecrate." In the post-aristocratic world of French society, individual status could no longer be guaranteed by the family name. The naive hero's belief in the magical power of names, and in the Recherche demonstrates that this was always already the case, even with the Guermantes, who owe as much allegiance to Germany as to France. The narrator ascribes Charlus with "German" behavior ("une

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<sup>56</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Proust et les signes, (Paris: PUF, 1986) 11 (my translation).

manière allemande,” SG 304). Madame de Cambremer tells the hero that the Guermantes are half German, which she says explains why Saint Loup is a “dreyfusard” (SG 480). This explains in part the Baron de Charlus’ sympathy for Germany in the first World War: “il allait plus loin que ne pas souhaiter passionément la victoire de la France, il souhaitait plutôt, sans se l’avouer, que l’Allemagne sinon triomphât, du moins ne fût pas écrasée comme tout le monde le souhaitait” (TR 80), “he went beyond not passionately desiring the victory of France: he desired rather without admitting it to himself, that Germany should, if not triumph, at least not be crushed as everybody hoped she would be” (III: 797). We learn in the final volume that Charlus considers himself German: “si longtemps après la guerre, il gémissait de la défaite des Allemands, parmi lesquels il se comptait” (TR 171) “The war had long since ended, and still he groaned over the defeat of the Germans, among whose number he counted himself” (III: 896).

The climax of the novel coincides with the devaluation of the name Guermantes, as the narrator discovers not only the change in individuals that time has wrought, but also that the salon of the Princesse of Guermantes, once the beacon of elegance in the Faubourg Saint Germain, is inhabited by “foreign bodies” which, in the past would have been excluded:

ce milieu en la nature spécifique duquel, définie par certaines affinités qui lui attiraient tous les grands noms princiers de l’Europe et la répulsion qui éloignait d’elle tout élément non aristocratique, j’avais trouvé comme un refuge matériel pour ce nom de Guermantes auquel il prêtait sa dernière réalité, ce milieu avait lui-même subi dans sa constitution intime et que j’avais crue stable, une altération profonde (TR 262)

this coterie, within the specific nature of which, delimited as it was by certain affinities that attracted to it all the great princely names of Europe and by forces of an opposite kind which repelled from it anything that was not aristocratic, I had found, I thought, a sort of corporeal refuge for the name Guermantes, this coterie which had seemed to confer upon that name its ultimate reality, had itself, in its innermost and as I had thought stable constitution, undergone a profound transformation” (III: 1000)

The change in the constitution of the Princesse's salon is characteristic of a tendency of society as a whole: "Car ce que caractérisait le plus cette société, c'était sa prodigieuse aptitude au déclassement" (TR 262).<sup>57</sup> This "déclassement" corresponds to the elevation of those who were previously excluded, and seems to split them into different people.

This social change, says the narrator, is a phenomenon of memory:

J'entendais des gens qui auraient pourtant dû savoir, dire en parlant de Bloch: «Le Bloch-Guermantes? Le familier des Guermantes?» Ces erreurs qui scindent une vie et, en isolant le présent, font de l'homme dont on parle un autre homme, un homme différent, une création de la veille, un homme qui n'est que la condensation de ses habitudes actuelles (alors que lui porte en lui-même la continuité de sa vie qui le relie au passé), ces erreurs dépendent bien aussi du Temps, mais elles sont non un phénomène social, mais un phénomène de mémoire. (TR 262)

And now, with reference to Bloch, even those who ought to have known better might be heard to inquire: "The Guermantes Bloch? The Bloch who is such a friend of the Guermantes? these errors which split a life in two and, by isolating his present from his past, turn some man whom one is talking about into another, a different man, a creation of yesterday, a man who is no more than a condensation of his present habits (whereas the real man bears within himself an awareness, linking him to the past, of the continuity of his life), these errors, though they too, as I have said, are a result of the passage of Time, are not a social phenomenon, but one of memory. (III: 1011)

The shifting of the proper name is equated by Proust himself as a usurpation of property:

"The succession of a new individual to a name is melancholy, as is all succession, all usurpation of property; and yet for ever and ever, without interruption, there would come, sweeping on, a flood of new Princesses de Guermantes—or rather, centuries old, replaced from age to age by a series of different women, of different actresses playing the same part" (III: 999).

In Le temps retrouvé alliance, that is to say association, has displaced lineage as the organizing principle. Synchrony has displaced history (thus the difficulty many people have in reading Proust "for the plot") and an identity based on relation to the

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<sup>57</sup> "The most characteristic aspect of this society was its prodigious aptitude for loss of class status" (My translation. This passage missing from the standard English translation).



other must also displace an identity based on essence. When identity is based on a relationship to an other, it becomes necessary to define that other; hence the narrator's efforts to exhaustively know others as the context for his own affirmation as self. As Bersani puts it: "The narrator insistently asks: how can *I* be? The question is generated by Marcel's shattering discovery—or at least suspicion—that *others are*" (863). The failure of this project of knowing can be seen in the inconsistencies and lacuna of the narrative itself.

### Fractured Narrative

Both on the level of the signifier and on the level of the signified, in the style of the narration and the story which it tells: the text is much more fractured than it may appear. Many crucial events seem to be missing from the narrative. The advent of the war in the final volume corresponds to one of the more noticeable gaps in the narration: an undefined period of "several years" which the narrator spends "far from Paris in a sanatorium," having completely renounced his desire to be a writer (TR 29; III: 743). In this time, the hero has grown old, a fact which is as imperceptible to the reader as it is to him. It is only when he recognizes the aged faces of the other invited guests at the *matinée* of the Princess of Guermantes that he realizes that he too has grown old:

Alors moi qui depuis mon enfance, vivant au jour le jour et ayant reçu d'ailleurs de moi-même et des autres une impression définitive, je m'aperçus pour la première fois, d'après les métamorphoses qui s'étaient produites dans tous ces gens, du temps qui avait passé pour eux, ce qui me bouleversa par la révélation qu'il avait passé aussi pour moi" (TR 233)

So that at last I, who from childhood had lived from day to day and had received, of myself and of others, impressions which I regarded as definitive, became aware as I had never been before—by an inevitable inference from the metamorphoses which had taken place in all the people around me—of the time which had passed for them, a notion which brought with it the overwhelming revelation that it had passed also for me. (III: 967)

Once again, the narrator can only recognize himself in his image as reflected through others. This realization comes as a surprise for the reader, too, for there is very little in the novel to suggest the progress of the narrator's life.

Far from presenting a "whole picture" of the narrator's "lost time," the novel leaves large gaps in the chronology of the life. We know nothing of his formal education or employment. These gaps are especially evident in the final volume, where the "leaps ahead" in the story of the hero's life become increasingly larger, while the amount of text devoted to relatively small amounts of "story time" increases dramatically.<sup>58</sup> The process of filling in those gaps is the very process of remembering (or we might also say "of writing").

Gerard Genette points out three possible relationships between plot and narrative, wherein events that happened once can be recounted once. This "singular" mode of discourse is the standard mode of traditional narrative. Alternatively the same event can be recounted more than once, in a repetitive narrative mode. Finally, events which recurred more than once can be summarized in a single narrative instance. This is what Genette calls "iterative" discourse. In the traditional narrative, the iterative discursive elements are always subordinated to the singular. In Proust, this is reversed. Even the singular events, things which, according to verisimilitude, can only have happened once, are often presented in the imperfect. Genette calls this the "pseudo-iterative" and qualifies this as a particularly Proustian mode of discourse.

The *artificiality* of a large part of the memories recounted in the novel is manifest in the way that characters are always caught in habitual postures or actions. The dominance of the imperfect tense demonstrates this. People are described as they "used to" behave. The soirees of the Verdurins or the Duchesse de Guermantes are "synthetic" narratives: amalgams of many soirees spliced together by the flow of the text itself. Most

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<sup>58</sup> For the distinctions between "story time," "textual time," "plot," and "narrative," see my discussion of Gérard Genette *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972.) in the next chapter.

of the actions are things that habitually happened. Even the intermittent anecdotes that the narrator recounts, introduced by “Une fois” and “une autre” which would seem to be unique events, accumulate and transform into exemplars of many similar repeated events, with a formulation such as: “ainsi chaque fois que. . .”

The whole episode of “Un amour de Swann,” for example, begins with the basic temporal patterns of habitual actions: It first establishes the rituals of behavior in the “petit noyau” of the Verdurin clan, and opposes to it the irruption of in habitual behavior when Odette introduces Swann: “cette année-là, la demi-mondaine raconta à M. Verdurin qu’elle avait fait la connaissance d’un homme charmant, M. Swann” (S 187-88), but soon the novelty is assimilated by the repetitive nature of *salon* activities.

The opposition of voluntary and involuntary memory is built around this alternation of habit and novelty. The things we can easily recall form only a “sort of luminous panel,” a tiny fragment of an unknown whole. Gradually all novelty is converted into Habit. So crucial a role does the force of habit play in his novel, that Proust often capitalizes the term. Order is preserved only by suppressing accidents and difference. Yet anomaly and difference continue to disrupt habit up to the very end of the novel.

The narrator himself is engaged in an ongoing quest for unity: he describes himself as a young man in search of some “great philosophical truth,” on which to base a novel, but this ideal forever eludes him. He must continually come to terms with things that are not as they (once) may have appeared to be. This is due in part to the inadequacies of his powers of observation, to the fallibility of human judgment and perception, as, for example, when he mistakes the signature on a letter from Gilberte to be that of Albertine, or in the little train leading to the Verdurin’s summer salon at la Raspelière, where he observes an old prostitute, whom he later discovers to have been not a prostitute, but the Princesse de Sherbatoff (SG 251, 285). But as Roland Barthes points

out, the narrator's dilemma can not simply be attributed to the "banal play of appearance and truth."<sup>59</sup>

In the Recherche, human identity displays a chameleon-like quality which is demonstrated incessantly in the novel. At the beginning of the second volume, we learn that Swann has acquired yet still another personality for the narrator: as the husband of Odette. It is surprising and highly ironic that Swann has married Odette, because, at the end of the "Swann in love," we learn that they have separated. Swann seemed to have realized his mistake falling for a girl who "wasn't even his type." ("il s'écria en lui même: «Dire que j'ai gâché des années de ma vie, que j'ai voulu mourir, que j'ai eu mon plus grand amour, pour une femme qui ne me plaisait pas, qui n'était pas mon genre!», " S 375) This unexpected and unexplained reversal by which Swann is suddenly Odette's husband is only one example of a process of revision which is effectively never ending in Proust's novel.

Swann is a double for the narrator in many ways, not only through the resemblance of his jealousy for and suspicions about Odette, which foretells the narrator's relationship to Albertine, but also because, like Swann, the narrator wants to be a writer. The narrator's sense of himself is only established as a reflection of those around him. As he says in the first volume: "notre personnalité social est une création de la pensée des autres" (S 19), "our social personality is a creation of other people's thoughts."

Proustian characters are full of surprises. The hero is continually forced to adjust his beliefs both to new circumstances and because of his faulty observation. In the course of the novel transformations are apparent in almost all of the major characters. They are not seen as gradually changing or evolving. They are abruptly and inexplicably discovered to be other than themselves. They are not one, but many.

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<sup>59</sup> Roland Barthes "Une idée de recherche" in Recherche de Proust, eds. Gérard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov (Paris: Seuil, 1980) 35 - 36.

The most exemplary figure in this respect is that of Albertine. The hero's relationship to her is built around his need to unravel the mystery of her desires.<sup>60</sup> It is his desire for an exhaustive knowledge of her past and present activities that leads him to cloister her in his parents' apartment. The only moment when the hero is able to enjoy the illusion of truly possessing Albertine is when he observes her sleeping in his parents' apartment. The death-like image of her immobile body, gives the illusion that she can be completely grasped, completely possessed.

His suspicions about her life (her lives) away from him are never fully calmed. At every turn, he discovers a bewildering multiplicity of Albertines: "Hélas! Albertine était plusieurs personnes," (P 324) "Alas! Albertine was several persons in one" (III: 343). Even after she is gone, the narrator discovers that she is no less an «être de fuite»:

Mais ce fut surtout ce fractionnement d'Albertine en de nombreuses parts, en de nombreuses Albertines, qui était son seul mode d'existence en moi. Des moments revinrent où elle n'avait été que bonne, ou intelligente, ou sérieuse, ou même aimant plus que tout les sports. Et ce fractionnement, n'était-il pas au fond juste qu'il me calmât? Car s'il n'était pas en lui-même quelque chose de réel, s'il tenait à la forme successive des heures où elle m'était apparue, forme qui restait celle de ma mémoire, comme la courbure des projections de ma lanterne magique tenait à la courbure des verres colorés, ne représentait-il pas à sa manière une vérité bien objective celle-là, à savoir que chacun de nous n'est pas un, mais contient de nombreuses personnes qui n'ont pas toutes la même valeur morale et que si l'Albertine vicieuse avait existé, cela n'empêchait pas qu'il y en eût eu d'autres [...] (AD 110).

But it was above all that fragmentation of Albertine into many parts, into many Albertines, that was her sole mode of existence in me. Moments recurred in which she had simply been kind, or intelligent, or serious, or even primarily addicted to sport. And was it not right, after all, that this fragmentation should soothe me? For if it was not in itself something real, if it arose from the continuously changing shape of the hours in which she had appeared to me, a shape which remained that of my memory as the curve of the projections of my magic lantern depended on the curve of the coloured slides, did it not in its own way represent a truth, a thoroughly objective truth too, to wit, that none of us is single, that each

<sup>60</sup> To Proust, "the 'possession' of someone loved is inseparable from an exhaustive knowledge of their past and present." J. Humphries, *The Otherness Within: Gnostic Readings in Marcel Proust*. Flannery O'Connor, & François Villon. (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1983) 11.

of us contains many persons who do not all have the same moral value, and that if a vicious Albertine had existed, it did not mean that there had not been others [. . .] (III: 540)

His suspicions about her are provoked by his projection onto her of his own desires. The multiplicity he perceives in Albertine mirrors his many selves: "ce qui me torturait à imaginer chez Albertine, c'était mon propre désir perpétuel de plaire à de nouvelles femmes [. . .] Comme il n'est de connaissance, on peut presque dire qu'il n'est de jalousie que de soi même" (P 371). "what it tortured me to imagine in Albertine was my own perpetual desire to find favor with new women [. . .]. As there is no knowledge, one might almost say that there is no jealousy, save of oneself" (III: 392 - 93). The fleeting nature of Albertine implies the multiplicity and elusiveness of the narrators own self-knowledge.

Love and jealousy in Proust is synonymous with the desire to obtain an exhaustive knowledge of all the points in time and space which the loved one has occupied. Thus jealousy is the ultimate figure for the undefinable nature of the real:

C'est un des pouvoirs de la jalousie de nous découvrir combien la réalité des faits extérieurs et les sentiments de l'âme sont quelque chose d'inconnu qui prête à mille suppositions. Nous croyons savoir exactement les choses, et ce que pensent les gens, pour la simple raison que nous ne nous en soucions pas. Mais dès que nous avons le désir de savoir, comme a le jaloux, alors c'est un vertigineux kaléidoscope où nous ne distinguons plus rien. (AD 100)

It is one of the faculties of jealousy to reveal to us the extent to which the reality of external facts and the sentiments of the heart are an unknown element which lends itself to endless suppositions. We imagine that we know exactly what things are and what people think, for the simple reason that we do not care about them. But as soon as we have a desire to know, as the jealous man has, then it becomes a dizzy kaleidoscope in which we can no longer distinguish anything. (III: 529)

The numerous contradictory images he has of Albertine, and the loss of the ability to trust his impressions of what is real, reveal to him the indeterminacy of his own desires and the multiplicity of his own behavior:

Ce n'était pas Albertine seule qui n'était qu'une succession de moments, c'était aussi moi-même. Mon amour pour elle n'avait pas été simple: à la

curiosité de l'inconnu s'était ajouté un désir sensuel, et à un sentiment d'une douceur presque familiale, tantôt l'indifférence, tantôt une furieuse jalousie. Je n'étais pas un seul homme, mais le défilé d'une armée composite où il y avait selon le moment des passionnés, des indifférents, des jaloux—des jaloux dont pas un n'était jaloux de la même femme. (AD 71).

It was not Albertine alone who was a succession of moments, it was also myself. My love for her was not simple: to a curiosity about the unknown had been added a sensual desire, and to a feeling of almost conjugal sweetness, at one moment indifference, at another a furious jealousy. I was not one man only, but as it were the march-past of a composite army in which there were passionate men, indifferent men, jealous men—jealous men not one of whom was jealous of the same woman (III: 499)

Ironically, the calm he feels watching her sleep is not reproduced when he learns of her actual death. Jealousy, he learns, is not dependent on its object, on the external world, for all of the jealous lover's suspicions and suppositions emanate from himself.

Quand notre maitresse est vivante, une grande partie des pensées qui forment ce que nous appelons notre amour nous viennent pendant les heures où elle n'est pas à côté de nous. Ainsi l'on prend l'habitude d'avoir pour objet de sa rêverie un être absent, et qui, même s'il ne le reste que quelques heures, pendant ces heures-là n'est qu'un souvenir. Aussi la mort ne change-t-elle pas grand-chose (AD 104).

When one's mistress is alive, a large proportion of the thoughts which form what one calls one's love comes to one during the hours when she is not by one's side. Thus one acquires the habit of having as the object of one's musings an absent person, and one who, even if she remains absent for a few hours only, during those hours is no more than a memory. Hence death does not make any great difference. (III: 534)

There is nothing unusual about this, he concludes, since the images of Albertine that he had, came not from her, but from himself. He continues to act and think as if she were still alive even after he learns of her death in a horse-riding accident.

Accordingly, in the progress of his forgetfulness after she has died the narrator discovers that this oblivion implies a loss of the *self*:

Et comme dans les nouveaux espaces, encore non parcourus qui s'étendaient devant moi, il n'y aurait pas plus de traces de mon amour pour Albertine qu'il n'y en avait eu dans les temps perdus que je venais de traverser, de mon amour pour ma grand'mère, offrant une succession de périodes sous lesquelles, après un certain intervalle, rien de ce qui soutenait

la précédente ne subsistait plus dans celle qui la suivait, ma vie m'apparut comme quelque chose de si dépourvu du support d'un moi individuel identique et permanent" [. . .] (AD 173)

And as in the new spaces, as yet unexplored, which extended before me, there would be no more trace of my love for Albertine than there had been, in the time lost which I had just traversed, of my love for my grandmother, my life appeared to me—offering a succession of periods in which, after a certain interval, nothing of what had sustained the previous period survived in that which followed—as something utterly devoid of the support of an individual, identical and permanent self. (III: 607)

If the ability to forget implies a loss of self, it is because memory is the essence of the self.

Without memory, there can be no narrative, and without narrative, there is no identity.

The question of Albertine's homosexuality, which so plagues Proust's hero, further illustrates the undefinable nature of identity, for even sexual "identity" is ephemeral. Commenting on Albertine's "polymorphous seductiveness," Julia Kristeva notes that Proust "intends it to be universal. Each sex and each person (Albertine no less than anyone else) would be a network of partitioned differences and adjacent incompatibilities (a 'Vinteuil' side, a 'hideous' side). The whole person is unaware of these divisions, for in the final analysis this 'whole' person does not exist. He is nothing but features and characteristics" (72).

The models of language and consciousness which emerge from Marcel Proust and William Faulkner's novels reveal an almost infinite potential for associations and anecdotes; time is exploded into disparate fragments linked no longer by chronology and logic, but by the fabric of association. Subjectivity is the building of a complex web of intertextual references. But contexts can never be fixed. The narrator's inability to correctly observe and understand those around him can also be attributed to the ever-changing nature of his social context. But, as we have seen, the narrator ultimately ascribes the flux of social values to the fluctuations of memory.

Our memories, and thus our knowledge of who we are, of where we've been and who we've known, is critically dependent on arbitrarily established initial conditions, one of which is on the present of our remembering. Proust's hero discovers that the



recurrence of physical sensation is capable of triggering memory, but this effect is fundamentally a chance occurrence,<sup>61</sup> and it is the ultimate chance occurrence, the unforeseeable event of our death which threatens any identity with annihilation, while at the same time seemingly fixing identity by closing the process of recontextualization.

Being the story of a life, the narrator's death is the moment towards which the text must inevitably point; yet this death is forever deferred by the circularity of the novel: the end of which corresponds to the moment when the narrator takes up the pen to begin writing. There is a Proustian logic in which writing is equivalent to a kind of death. As he finally begins to write, he describes the process of writing as a "tiresome obligation:" "Cette idée de la mort s'installa définitivement en moi comme fait un amour," (TR 349) "The idea of death took up permanent residence within me in the way that love sometimes does." Why is writing here so linked to the idea of death? The narrator's great fear is that he will not have enough time to finish his work. Writing thus becomes a race against time, against. It is only death which can put an end to the perpetual becoming of the work: "l'idée de mon œuvre était dans ma tête, toujours la même, en perpétuel devenir," "the idea of my work was inside my head, always the same, perpetually in process of becoming" (III: 1099-1100). This perpetual process of becoming is nothing more than what Rorty calls recontextualization.

Proust seeks to master and reveal the involuntary memory in the belief that it contains the essence of lost time. The narrator fetishizes the object which provokes the involuntary memory, so that this object symbolizes and makes present that past moment. The object thus becomes a link to the past. From its original chance association through proximity (metonymy) to the events being remembered memory, the seemingly insignificant decor, the object stands now in a metaphorical relation, a relation of necessity, to memory. The object contains the *essence* of that memory.

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<sup>61</sup> "Il y a beaucoup de hasard en tout ceci" (S 43).

As noted above, Gilles Deleuze has characterized À la Recherche du temps perdu as a novel of “*apprentissage*,” a bildungsroman which gives us a portrait of the education and formation of the central character. But the novel does very little to suggest growth or progress in the hero’s life either as an artist or as a respectable young man, and one of the lessons that he will learn is clearly that of the seemingly arbitrary variability of the phenomena of identity, personality, and social values. Proust’s narrator is never able to give a complete or coherent portrait of other characters, because they are all capable of displaying heretofore unknown aspects or behavior at different times or in different contexts. At the beginning of A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, the narrator makes a remark that is echoed again and again throughout the novel: “il était arrivée qu’au «*fils Swann*» et aussi au Swann du Jockey, l’ancien ami de mes parents avait ajouté une personnalité nouvelle (et qui ne devait pas être la dernière), celle de mari d’Odette” (3). “What had happened was that, to the original ‘young Swann’ and also to the Swann of the Jockey Club, our old friend had added a new personality (which was not to be his last), that of Odette’s husband” (I: 465). The appearance of a second, and even a third Charles Swann signals as much a long term transformation in the narrating subject as in the character of Swann; the sudden fashionableness of the salons of Odette Swann or Mme Verdurin, the transformation of Charlus from the caricaturishly zealous representative of a patriarchal dynasty to a “an old queen” (“une vieille tante”), and the transformation of the entire social hierarchy after the Dreyfus affair and the war represent ever-accelerating, and ever more pronounced changes. The rapidity and the unpredictability (that is to say, the arbitrariness) of these changes demonstrate the lack of solid foundations for social identities, and values, and thus for any identity, including that of the narrator. His story can never be fully told, never exhausted, for the characters are continually modified as it progresses. Rather than having the details of their personality “filled in,” these characters are progressively “hollowed out,” emptied of their

consistency as individuals. The loquacity of Proust's narrator betrays a logophilia which is none other than a desire for completion, for consistency where none is possible.

In spite of all his efforts to understand the hidden nature of people and of art and to transcend time itself by the discovery of some great, hidden philosophical truth (S 176-77) It is, instead, a nearly divine revelation, a *deux ex machina* that will break the camel's back of lost years with a flood of memories and revelations. The narrator does not build gradually his understanding of truth; instead it comes all at once, unexpectedly and unpredictably. It is the completely fortuitous events at the Princesse de Guermantes's *matinée*, the involuntary memory awakened by his stumbling on the uneven paving stones of their courtyard, a kind of *deux ex machina*, which enables the narrator to begin writing, by freeing him from the necessity of a telos.

A la recherche du temps perdu is a narrative governed by chance, and as such is emblematic of a general trend in twentieth-century thought to a reconsideration and revaluation of complex or chaotic behavior in conscious and unconscious processes. What is put to the fore is its involuntary, mechanical or arbitrary functioning. The supreme effort of the will is inferior to the chance revelations of time.

In this Proust may well have been ahead of his time, scientifically speaking. Researchers exploring the nature of the brain and human consciousness have come to conclude that, rather than being stored in some location of the brain, simply awaiting retrieval by consciousness, memory is akin more to dynamic interaction with consciousness. The normal human brain apparently does not store *fixed* memories. Rather, a healthy human mind continually reinvents memories from sensations and feelings. Since much of what we consider to be our "identity" is bound up in our personal experiences and memories, it is clear then that "identification" is a contingent, ongoing process which only arbitrarily appears to be fixed. There are few exceptions to this rule. Though people who have suffered some forms of brain damage do exhibit fixed memories, this is because they are no longer capable of forming new ones.

Nothing in Proust's novel is ever definitive, including and especially personal identity as it is reconstructed by memory or narration. The ultimate example of this in Proust's novel is the hero's obsession with Albertine, whom he sequesters in his parents apartment in order to know as much as possible about her daily activities, thoughts and desires. To his dismay what he discovers is that scrutiny only amplifies the mystery of being. The closer one looks the more Albertines one can find. This does not mean, however that Proust is ready to completely abandon the quest. His opus is just such an effort. The lengths to which he went to unify and structure his novel display the Cartesian subject's desire to master and overcome the chaos of his own patterns of thought. William Faulkner, writing two decades after Proust seems to have more readily assimilated the lessons illustrated in Proust's novel. The link between these two authors is this attempt to represent the patterns of thought, an attempt which ultimately demonstrates the paradoxical nature of both representation and being.

#### Social Fluidity in Faulkner

The thing that Quentin has difficulty accepting is the realization of the inevitability of such social promiscuity. It is this promiscuity which threatens the sanctity of the Compson family as well, since Quentin's exposure to life at Harvard comes at the price of the Compson land. It is the promiscuity of Caddy which leads to Quentin's obsession with virginity, and his frustrated desire to preserve and to violate that sanctity.

Quentin Compson's world is divided into castes by several factors, including race, sex, money and class. As in Proust, the aristocracy, as represented by families such as the Compsons or the Guermantes, is in decline, as much from its own weaknesses as from the illegitimacy of their own pretensions. The difference in the world of Yoknapatawpha is that the Southern planter aristocracy wasn't nearly as well-established. While the Civil War might be cited as the external reason for the downfall of the Southern aristocracy, their demise in Absalom, Absalom! and The Sound and the Fury is

depicted as the result of the internal weaknesses and flaws of the Sutpen, Compson and Sartoris families.

### The Proper Name

In Absalom, Absalom! Faulkner dramatizes the failure of the patriarchal system to be a guarantor of identity, through the perpetuation of the proper name and the family property. While Sutpen is a self-made man, his “design” for his children is predicated upon their submission to his plan, the production of a male heir. Mr Compson claims that Sutpen named all of his children.

Sutpen’s design includes the acquisition of names. His marriage to Ellen is described by Mr Compson (in chapter II) as the result, not of a romantic courtship, but of a business deal consisting of the formal exchange of titles: “Miss Rosa was righter than she knew: he did want, not the anonymous wife and the anonymous children, but the two names, the stainless wife and the unimpeachable father-in-law, on the license, the patent. Yes the patent with a gold seal and red ribbons too if that had been practicable” (AA 59).

Mr. Compson’s insistence that Sutpen named all of his children himself seems incongruous with the choice of names. The origins that Sutpen ascribes to himself in the tale of his nomadic childhood in the Appalachian mountains of Virginia seem hardly conducive to his acquisition of the education necessary to understand the significance of the names he chose. Mr Compson sees Sutpen’s choice of name for his mulatto offspring as the mistake of a semi-literate man:

Yes, Clytie was his daughter too: Clytemnestra. He named her himself. He named them all himself: all his own get and all the get of his wild niggers after the country began to assimilate them. [. . .] He named Clytie as he named them all, the one before Clytie and Henry and Judith even, with that same robust and sardonic temerity, naming with his own mouth his own ironic fecundity of dragon’s teeth which with the two exceptions were girls. Only I have always liked to believe that he intended to name her Cassandra, prompted by some pure dramatic economy not only to beget but to designate the presiding augur of his own disaster,

and that he just got the name wrong through a mistake natural in a man who must have almost taught himself to read). [. . .] (AA 73 - 74)

In naming his children he has chosen names from the Old Testament, such as Judith, or names inspired by Greek mythology such as the Queen Clytemnestra, wife of Agamemnon, who led the Greeks against Troy. Mr. Compson claims that the name Clytemnestra was a mistake, as he really meant to name her Cassandra, the slave and prophetess of doom who is witness to the death and destruction in the house of Atreus. So that Sutpen would have mistaken the queen for the servant. At the time of the Mr Compson's conversation with Quentin in the summer of 1910, Clytemnestra is the only known remaining inhabitant of Sutpen's plantation.

Faulkner's choice of names for these characters places their story in the context of Greek tragedy, a context in which Mr Compson explicitly places them. While Miss Rosa depicts Sutpen as a demon, Mr Compson wants to see Sutpen as a tragic figure.: "And what [Miss Rosa] saw then was just that ogre-face of her childhood seen once and then repeated at intervals [. . .], like the mask in Greek tragedy interchangeable not only from scene to scene but from actor to actor and behind which the events and occasions took place without chronology or sequence" (AA 74).

Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels depict a breakdown in social hierarchies, in which prestigious land owning families such as the Sartorises and the Compsons are supplanted by interlopers such as the Snopses, in which the South which must come to terms with the intermingling of cultures and races, with a generalized principle of *mixing*, *creolization*, or *métissage*. This principle of creolization is shown to have been already present at the heart of the plantation system, in the fruit of the slaveowner's promiscuity, but with the demise of the Old South the system of exclusion on which the institution depended is unmasked.

In an action which mirrors Sutpen's own repudiation of his first wife and child, Henry disavows his birthright and disappears (perhaps taking an assumed name?), thus

undoing the father's plan from within by abdicating his role as perpetuator of the family name. His murder of Charles Bon at the gates of the Sutpen plantation is an extreme form of the encounter in which the young Sutpen is refused entrance to the big house. The exclusion of the other is a demarcation of property through the denial of access to an outsider. In both cases, the outside is in one respect assimilable to the inside, since it is the young white boy who is refused entry to the white man's mansion, and it is Sutpen's son (Bon) who is excluded. The exclusion marks the other as other, instituting or affirming a difference against the danger of an improper mixing.

Bon's exclusion from Sutpen's Hundred is a denial of incest in which Henry plays the role of his father in relation to the unrecognized son. It is thus also a symbolic act of denial of paternity: It is Thomas Sutpen, the father, refusing to recognize his son. In the words of Édouard Glissant, "the novel suggests that, in the South, one might admit –conceive of– incest, but not the intrusion of black blood which is nevertheless there."<sup>62</sup>

Absalom, Absalom! tells of a perversion of legitimacy and paternity. Sutpen repudiates his first wife and their child because he discovers that she was an octoroon. Though he has children by his slaves, the "design" that Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson attribute to him meant the birth of a white male heir who could perpetuate his name. Instead his child by the first marriage, Charles Bon, returns to court Sutpen's daughter, Judith, from his second marriage. When Sutpen informs his legitimate son, Henry, of the twin threats of incest and miscegenation, the latter murders Bon at the gates of the plantation, repudiates his inheritance and disappears.

Sutpen's own origins are unknown. The history of the family lines is blocked by the impossibility of finding the *origin*. Sutpen is a man who "appeared" in Yoknapatawpha County "out of no discernible past" (9), and with "a name that none of

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<sup>62</sup> "le roman suggère qu'on pourrait ici (dans le Sud) admettre - concevoir - l'inceste, mais non pas l'intrusion du sang noir qui est pourtant là." Édouard Glissant, Poétique de la Relation. (Paris: Gallimard, 1990) 70.

them had ever heard, and origin and purpose which some of them were never to learn” (35). He tells General Compson of his ignorance about his own father’s origins. His attempts to found a lineage on the 100 acres of land he mysteriously acquired are ruined by the “mixing” of races and cultures, the perversion of patriarchal lineage.

Absalom, Absalom! employs gossip, hearsay, speculation, a multiplicity of voices and a cyclical structure. The same events are recounted repeatedly, each time revealing new connections and details about the circumstances of crucial episodes, such as the murder of Charles Bon by Henry Sutpen. The reader is informed of the major events almost from the very start of the novel, so that the emphasis is not on the recounting of the *action*, but on the revelation of facts, on speculation about the facts. The story too as it is told by first Rosa Coldfield, and then Quentin Compson’s father, is presented as something mysterious and inexplicable.

While much about the man remains a mystery to the inhabitants of Jefferson--even those such as Rosa Coldfield, who has family ties through his marriage to her sister--Quentin and Mr. Compson are the beneficiaries of supplemental information about Sutpen’s origins, thanks mostly to Quentin’s grandfather, General Compson, in whom the man seems to have confided a great deal. It is through General Compson that one of the earliest scenes in the novel, and thus perhaps a great deal of Sutpen’s motivation, is revealed. The pretext for this important revelation is the occasion of the French architect’s flight into the woods, first recounted in chapter II, but only elaborated by Quentin to Shreve in chapter VI (AA 219 - 56). This event further strengthens the association of the Compsons with Sutpen, since it was information that seems only to have been confided to General Compson:

“He told grandfather about it,” said Quentin, “that time when the architect escaped, tried to, tried to escape into the river bottom and go back to New Orleans or wherever it was, and he [. . .] sent word in to grandfather and some others and got his dogs and his wild niggers out and hunted the architect down and made him take earth in a cave under the river bank two days later” (AA 272).



What Sutpen told Quentin's grandfather on that night was of his origins in the West Virginia mountains, and of the origin of his plan to establish a plantation. According to Quentin, this plan grew out of the child's sudden realization of his family's stature, which occurred in his early adolescence, during his family's nomadic existence, moving from town to town, and back and forth from the mountains to the plains, with "niggers working in the fields while white men sat on fine horses and watched them, and more fine horses and men in fine clothes, with a different look in the face from mountain men about the tavern where the old man was not even allowed to come in by the front door and from which his mountain drinking manners got him ejected." "And the man was there who owned all the land and the niggers and apparently the white men who superintended the work, and who lived in the biggest house he had ever seen and who spent most of the afternoon (he told how he would creep up among the tangled shrubbery of the lawn and lie hidden and watch the man) in a barrel stave hammock between two trees, with his shoes off, and a nigger who wore every day better clothes than he or his father and sisters had ever owned and ever expected to, who did nothing else but fan him and bring him drinks" (AA 228).

The young man imagined himself no different from the white men on horses, until he was sent by his father to the big house of the plantation on which his family lived.

a boy either thirteen or fourteen, he didn't know which, in garments his father had got from the plantation commissary and had worn out and which one of the sisters had patched and cut down to fit him, and he was no more conscious of his appearance in them or of the possibility that anyone else would be than he was of his skin, following the road and turning into the gate and following the drive [. . .] (AA 286)

His unconsciousness about the significance of his appearance in worn-out, second-hand garments is an ignorance about the significance of such outward signs, about the way in

which they mark him as different from the rich white man who he imagines will welcome him. This ignorance is postulated as an “innocence” by Quentin:

he told Grandfather how, before the monkey nigger who came to the door had finished saying what he said, he seemed to kind of dissolve and a part of him turn and rush back through the two years that they had lived there, like when you pass through a room fast and look at all the objects in it and you turn and go back through the room again and look at all the objects from the other side and you find out you had never seen them before (AA 286 - 87)

This encounter is described as a moment of clarity of vision in which the child’s understanding of his own place in the social pecking order is altered, or rather, in which the child first becomes aware of the existence of a pecking order among white men.

[. . .] he never even remembered what the nigger said, how it was the nigger told him, even before he had had time to say what he came for, never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back (AA 290)

The rebuff which he suffers at the door of the big house is a moment of revelation, in which the boy is introduced to the symbolic order of social class. He sees himself for the first time, in the image reflected back to him by the servant’s reaction. The servant, taking the place of the absent proprietor of the house, plays the role of father, which the young man’s drunken father apparently is incapable of doing.

“He had never thought about his own hair or clothes or anybody else’s hair or clothes until he saw that monkey nigger, who through no doing of his own happened to have had the felicity of being housebred in Richmond maybe, looking—(“Or maybe even in Charleston,” Shreve breathed)—at them and he never even remembered what the nigger said, how it was the nigger told him, even before he had had time to say what he came for, never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back” (AA 232)

This incident is told to by Sutpen to General Compson as a rationalization for his renunciation of his first wife in Haiti:

“that little boy who approached that door fifty years ago and was turned away, for whose vindication the whole plan was conceived and carried

forward to the moment of this choice, this second choice devolving out of that first one which in its turn was forced on me as the result of an agreement, an arrangement which I had entered in good faith, concealing nothing, while the other party or parties to it concealed from me the one very factor which would destroy the entire plan and design which I had been working toward (AA 274).

This crucial scene is not related in the early parts of the novel. Miss Rosa notably seems to be ignorant of Sutpen's background. As far as the rest of the inhabitants of Jefferson are concerned, Sutpen seems to have come out of nowhere.

### The Precariousness of History

In authors which are held up to be some kind of quintessential representative of a "national" literature (and therefore of a national identity) such as Marcel Proust or William Faulkner, these voices are over determined by the events, the names, and the social and political pressures and habits of people in particular places at particular times: the American South in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, or Paris and the French provinces at roughly the same time. But the great pride that many Frenchmen take in Proust, or the pride Americans (or Southerners) may take in Faulkner might well be attributed to their failure to have read these novels. Far from portraying some kind of essential national identity, these novels demonstrate the precariousness of such constructions, their dependence on ever-changing contexts and ongoing processes of narration.

The notion of a purely mechanical process, itself indifferent to the contents of perception and memory, to a consciousness or a personality which would function as individual *essence*, is central to this reading of these two works. That is not to say that the contents are not important, but rather that their choice is somewhat arbitrary. The cognitive functioning of memory and perception, is at least just as important. Absalom, Absalom! is as much about the construction of the narrative of the Sutpen family fortunes and its effect on the figure of Quentin Compson as it is about Thomas Sutpen himself.

What these novels demonstrate is the way in which time transforms beings, and how human perception impedes true “objective” knowledge of others—and therefore of the self—how in fact perception and consciousness must continually recontextualize time and character through constructions akin to never-ending narratives. The Proustian narrator’s attempts to give an adequate portrait of the characters which people his world run up against the realization that “même au point de vue des plus insignifiantes choses de la vie, nous ne sommes pas un tout matériellement constitué, identique pour tout le monde et dont chacun n’a qu’à aller prendre connaissance comme d’un cahier des charges ou d’un testament; notre personnalité sociale est une création de la pensée des autres,” “even from the point of view of the most insignificant things in life, we are not a materially constituted whole, identical for everybody and of whom one needs only be informed, as you’d look up information in a ledger or a will; our social personality is a creation of other people’s thoughts” (18–19). In the logic of Proust’s novel, the unstable fluctuations of consciousness and personality mirror a larger social instability. It remains impossible to determine which came first, although the narrator of the Recherche postulates a general rule which would determine both. That law is instability itself: “intermittences.” A law, however, normally implies both something predictable and a proscription or command concerning intentions. But a law of intermittences obeys neither of these conditions. It does not pretend to proscribe behavior, and is virtually useless as a predictive tool. Such a rule would imply the breakdown of law and order.

In the attempt to represent consciousness as an unstable mechanism of narrative production, many novelists may well have long intuited what science has since attempted to formulate in more rigorous terms: As Margaret E. Gray notes, neurological studies seem to suggest that personal memory (or consciousness) is not normally fixed, but is instead continually modified, recast, rewritten. In A la Recherche du temps perdu, says Gray, “Narration as the knowledgeable display of memory’s contents [. . .] might more

properly be read [. . .] as the incessant invention and revision of those contents.”<sup>63</sup> She finds interdisciplinary support for a shift from the notion of memory as fixed record to memory as ongoing invention:

At the ‘micro’ level, new developments in neurology imply that a mechanics of memory—the ceaseless reorganization of material [. . .] through new relationships among mental maps are tantamount to the ongoing elaboration of fictions. At the ‘macro’ level of organization, one might cite historiographic arguments for the tropological structuring of a historic past. The past, whether personal or historic, is increasingly formulated as a retrospective creation cast from the present.

Many readers have likewise noted Faulkner’s concern with the ongoing (re)writing of history. In Absalom Absalom! he is equally concerned with the effects of that continual creation of memory on the central narrator, Quentin Compson.

In a book presenting neurological studies of the question of human consciousness of self, Israel Rosenfield claims that consciousness is an ever-changing relation between present sense perceptions and past memories. Consciousness takes place in time, and the alteration of any one aspect of memory or perception (e.g. partial brain damage, the loss of a limb or of a sense, such as eyesight) can radically change the nature of that individual’s consciousness—to such an extent that we are led to affirm that s/he “is no longer the same person.” This judgment is often based upon that person’s altered behavior and, especially, his or her altered use of language. Our use of language is intimately connected with who we are. Proust knew this; that is why he takes care to remark each of his character’s idiosyncratic ways of expressing themselves, from the maid Françoise’s bastardizations and mispronunciations to Dr. Cottard’s awkward, exploratory use of clichés. Similarly, the (ab)uses of language in literary texts can lead us to affirm that the English of a Joyce or a Faulkner, or the French of Rabelais or Céline, is no longer the same language. These authors have come to be identified with a certain kind of language. But an identity that is based in a certain style of language is far

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<sup>63</sup> Gray, Margaret E. Postmodern Proust. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

different from an identity based on an immutable, essential self. Questions about the status of the work of art or of the significance of style are ultimately both versions of the questions concerning the nature of identity.

## Chapter 5: The Role of Art: *Mise en Abyme* in Proust and Faulkner

One seemingly obvious difference between Faulkner's novels and that of Proust is the degree to which the Recherche explicitly reflects upon the nature of itself as narrative, but Faulkner's novels are also concerned with their status as narrative. The language of both of these novels is characterized by self-referentiality. Such, then, is consciousness, continually reflecting (upon) *itself*. The self-reflective moments in literature is known in French as a *mise en abyme*, a heraldic term whose use in reference to literature was first suggested by André Gide. Gide claimed to prize in literary texts a feature long recognized in pictural representation: that of the mirror or "painting within a painting," the reduplication in miniature of the work of art as a whole. Lucien Dällenbach's book-length study of the *mise en abyme*, is an attempt to isolate a technique recognized in many different art forms, including painting, sculpture, and literary texts. Dällenbach is at pains to categorize and define the various types of mises en abyme, and his efforts illustrate the difficulty of strictly defining the term. A *mise en abyme* is essentially a part of a work of art which *reflects* the act or the product of artistic creation itself, and, by extension, its reception or interpretation. It is usually understood as a smaller part within a whole which bears a relation of similarity to the whole. It is, then, a representation of representation. Such a movement eventually negates the validity of representation altogether; negates the possibility of presenting anything. The assumed link between "reality" and the artistic rendering of that reality is called into question, as what is made obvious is the inability to retrace the route from a representation to that which is represented.

Dällenbach employs the linguistic distinctions of Roman Jakobson to distinguish three different kinds of self-reflexivity according to whether a text points to the enunciated, the enunciation or the linguistic code itself, that is, to the content, the act of composition, or the medium of a work of art ("une réflexion est un énoncé qui renvoie à l'énoncé, à l'énonciation ou au code du récit"). The *mise en abyme* is characterized by

the equivocal nature of its language. It continues to function in the story just as any other element, but it also takes on metatextual meaning, in which the work of art takes itself as its own theme (Dällenbach 62).

Part of the difficulty of such a definition is the ambiguity of the word “reflect.” A reflection can be anything from a detailed reproduction of a work of art to an allusion to it or art in general. An allusion to or an image of its creator, or even to the act of artistic creation itself can also be considered *mises en abyme*. To reflect can also simply mean to meditate on or think about something. With so many connotations, it is no wonder that Gide sought another term to precisely describe what he aimed at in his works. The key notions of reproduction or repetition coupled with visibility or appearance to the eye or mind. The idea of a reflection is indissociable from that of the origin or source. Without a source there can be no reflection, or, in other words, a reflection must reflect *something*.

The self-reflective nature of writing can be seen in texts from nearly every period. Indeed, self-reflexivity seems to be the rule, rather than the exception. When one begins to seek out such moments of self-reflection, they can be found on almost every page of *À la recherche du temps perdu*. The text abounds in reflections of, and upon, the acts of writing, reading and artistic creation in the narrator's discussions with other characters and in his own solitary reflections on literature, music, painting, theater, and the act of reading. This is not surprising given the fact that the book concerns itself, in a large measure, with a kind of “portrait of the artist” as apprentice, a would be poet or novelist. The acts of composing, of reading or interpreting a work of art, as well as the artist and the object itself are put *en abyme* on nearly every page of Proust's novel. The analyses of Balzac and Bergotte's writing styles, the pastiche of the Goncourt Journal, even the descriptions of Vinteuil's music or of Elstir's painting lead to the direct discussion of aesthetic values which inevitably invite the reader to apply them to the novel he is reading. The narrator's description of himself reading before falling asleep is an



exploration of the obscure boundaries between waking and sleep, fact and fantasy, which evokes the strange reciprocal relationship that exists between the dream world of fiction, the world of dreams, and the world of intentional thought processes. There are several more passages specifically focused upon the act of reading scattered throughout the novel. This culminates, in Le temps retrouvé, with the hero's realization that the difficulties he has in recognizing the people he once knew, at the Princesse de Guermantes's party, is not unlike his inability to remember the stories of the characters in one of Bergotte's novels:

Car je ne me rappelais plus bien ce qui était arrivé à ces personnages, ce qui ne les différenciaient d'ailleurs pas des personnes qui se trouvaient cet après-midi chez Mme de Guermantes et dont, pour plusieurs au moins, la vie passée était aussi vague pour moi que si je l'eusse lue dans un roman à demi oublié. Le prince d'Agrigente avait-il fini par épouser Mlle X... ? Ou plutôt n'était-ce pas le frère de Mlle X... qui avait dû épouser la sœur du prince d'Agrigente ? Ou bien faisais-je une confusion avec une ancienne lecture ou un rêve récent ? (TR 221)

For I no longer have any clear recollection of what happened to these characters, though in this respect they are scarcely to be distinguished from the men and women who were present this afternoon at Mme de Guermantes's party and whose past life, in many cases at least, was as vague in my mind as if I had read it in a half-forgotten novel. The Prince d'Agrigente, for instance: had he ended by marrying Mlle X-? Or was it rather the brother of Mlle X- who might have married the sister of the Prince d'Agrigente? Or was I confusing it all with something that I had read long ago or recently dreamed. (III: 952)

In this passage, the existential status of reality is shown to reside on the same level of doubt or certainty as fictions or dreams.

Le rêve était encore un de ces faits de ma vie, qui m'avait toujours le plus frappé, qui avait dû le plus servir à me convaincre du caractère purement mental de la réalité, et dont je ne dédaignerais pas l'aide dans la composition de mon œuvre. (TR 221)

Dreams were another of the facts of my life which had always most profoundly impressed me and had done most to convince me of the purely mental character of reality, and in the composition of my work I would not scorn their aid. (III: 952)

On this view, the work of art *creates* the real, just as real human beings become fictive characters.

Proust multiplies the references to works of art and literature to such an extent, that one begins to find everywhere allusions to the problem of meaning, interpretation, intention and signs in general. The many passages in Sodome et Gomorrhe and La Prisonnière which relate the narrator's efforts to research the gowns of Fortuny or the discussions of passages in Balzac, which themselves are descriptions of texts, that is to say of *textiles*, woven fabrics, designed by human hands: the *toilettes* of the Princess de Cadignan are also some of the many opportunities Proust uses as pretexts for discussions of aesthetics and artistic practice. Even a discussion of battlefield strategy with St.-Loup and his fellow soldiers during the narrator's visit to the army base of Doncières becomes a discussion of reading and interpretation: "Hé bien! par exemple, tout ce que vous lisez, je suppose, dans le récit d'un narrateur militaire, les plus petits faits, les plus petits evenements, ne sont que les signes d'une idée qu'il faut dégager et qui souvent en recouvre d'autres, comme dans un palimpseste" (CGII 102; II, 108 - 09).

Saint-Loup goes on to elaborate a theory of hermeneutics which could very well serve as a reader's guide for A la recherche du temps perdu: "De sorte que, si tu sais lire l'histoire militaire, ce qui est récit confus pour le commun des lecteurs est pour toi un enchaînement aussi rationnel qu'un tableau pour l'amateur qui sait regarder ce que le personnage porte sur lui, tient dans les mains, tandis que le visiteur ahuri des musées se laisse étourdir et migrainer par de vagues couleurs. Mais, comme pour certains tableaux où il ne suffit pas de remarquer que le personnage tient un calice, mais où il faut savoir pourquoi le peintre lui a mis dans les mains un calice, ce qu'il symbolise par là, ces opérations militaires, en dehors même de leur but immédiat, sont habituellement, dans l'esprit du général qui dirige la campagne, calquées sur des batailles plus anciennes qui sont, si tu veux, comme le passé, comme la bibliothèque, comme l'érudition, comme l'étymologie, comme l'aristocratie des batailles nouvelles" (104). To the alert reader, this

whole passage is a suggestion to look beyond the text, to read between the lines and discover a hidden order in the novel he is reading. It is the context of history, tradition and scholarship which provides the context. The image of a palimpsest is a literal rendering of the superimposition and dependence of the new upon the old, or as T.S. Eliot might say, "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

Proust's entire novel also places itself en abyme when it takes as its subject the story of its coming into being. While the narrator may be in search of lost time, the hero, his distant self, is shown to be forever on the lookout for some "great philosophical truth" upon which to base a novel (S 176 - 77). The narrator, reflecting back upon his youthful aspirations, invariably remembers the afflictions he felt at "not having the disposition for letters, and having to abandon the idea of ever becoming a writer."

It is in Albertine Disparue that the hero finally succeeds in getting his work into print, but he ironically, and significantly, misrecognizes it as the work of another: "J'ouvris *Le Figaro*. Quel ennui! Justement le premier article avait le même titre que celui que j'avais envoyé et qui n'avait pas paru" (148).

#### Faulkner's Self-reflective Text

While fewer obvious references to art and literature can be discerned in Faulkner's novel, it is significantly focused on the act of storytelling, which is emblematic of writing and reading simultaneously. Indeed, Miss Rosa suggests a future as a writer to Quentin in her first interview with the boy on the second page of the novel:

Because you are going away to attend the college at Harvard they tell me," she said. "So I don't imagine you will ever come back here and settle down as a country lawyer in a little town like Jefferson since Northern people have already seen to it that there is little left in the South for a young man. So maybe you will enter the literary profession as so many Southern gentlemen and gentlewomen too are doing now and maybe some day you will remember this and write about it (AA 6)

But the reason Rosa gives for such a choice is hardly inspiring. She appeals only to the pecuniary aspect of authorship: "You will be married then I expect and perhaps your wife

will want a new gown or a new chair for the house and you can write this and submit it to the magazines" (AA 6). Miss Rosa herself is said to have written "over a thousand odes to southern soldiers." She is "a woman who even in his (Quentin's) father's youth had already established (even if not affirmed) herself as the town's and the county's poetess laureate by issuing to the stern and meagre subscription list of the county newspaper poems, ode eulogy and epitaph, out of some bitter and implacable reserve of undefeat" (8). It is significant that Miss Rosa's artistic achievements have been imparted to Quentin as a result, not of ambition or inspiration, but "undefeat," the negation of a negation, rather than a forward-looking effort at artistic accomplishment. The odes to southern soldiers, eulogies and epitaphs, are manifestations of mourning the repetition of which reveals a morbid obsession with death and loss. These odes, as manifestations of a traditional poetic form to which Miss Rosa adheres, are further evidence of the rigidity and immobility of her thought. This immobility is already suggested by the setting and her posture as described in the opening pages and repeated throughout the first chapter of the novel.

The decision to frame the Sutpen story with the mechanism of the story's retelling to Quentin, and through him to the outside world, represented by the Canadian, Shreve, foregrounds the act of storytelling itself.

#### Storytelling in Absalom, Absalom!

In Absalom, Absalom!, Faulkner's text reflects indirectly upon the modality of its own operation in the idiosyncracies of storytelling which are attributed to Thomas Sutpen himself. Sutpen's taciturn nature renders all the more significant in the few scenes in which he does speak. General Compson having seemingly been his sole confidant in Yoknapatawpha county, their interviews are In chapter VII, Quentin tells Shreve about his grandfather's conversation with Thomas Sutpen, over the campfire on the night of their hunt for the fleeing French architect who was overseeing the building of the Sutpen plantation. It is in this conversation that Sutpen revealed to General Compson some key

details of his origins in the Virginia mountains and his first marriage to a creole woman in the French West Indies. The information obtained by Quentin's grandfather makes the Compsons privy to knowledge which the other residents of Yoknapatawpha do not have.

General Compson seems to have been struck by the detached manner in which the man spoke about his experiences: "and I reckon Grandfather was saying 'Wait, wait for God's sake wait' about like you are until he finally did stop and back up and start over again with at least some regard for cause and effect even if none for logical sequence and continuity" [ . . . ] Sutpen's style resembles that of the novel itself with repetitions, chronological displacements and lack of linear, logical development. The novel presents scenes which are interrupted only to be repeated and continued in later passages of the text, just as Sutpen's conversation with General Compson is interrupted and unexpectedly continued thirty years later: "It was thirty years before he told Grandfather any more of it" (301).

The manner in which Sutpen told his story seems to have been that of an impartial, detached observer, depicting events from the outside. The description Quentin gives of Sutpen's attitude as he told his story to General Compson, suggests an impartiality and detachment from his own life's story: "he telling it all over and still it was not absolutely clear—the how and the why he was there and what he was—since he was not talking about himself. He was telling a story. He was not bragging about something he had done; he was just telling a story about something a man named Thomas Sutpen had experienced, which would still have been the same story if the man had had no name at all" (308 - 09). The story he tells is unimbellished, factual and bare-bones. He supplies a minimum of details, giving the essential elements of his itinerary:

He went to the West Indies. That's how he said it: not how he managed to find where the West Indies were nor where ships departed from to go there nor how he got to where the ships were and got in one nor how he liked the sea and it must have been hardship indeed for him, a boy of

fourteen or fifteen who had never seen the ocean before, going to sea in 1823 (AA 299).

He gives no motivation or explanation for his actions, none of the “how and why” which preoccupies the other storytellers in the novel (and the reader). He mentions his first wife and child only in passing: “No more detail and information about that than about how he got from the field, his overseeing, to [ . . . ] than how he got from the rotting cabin in Virginia to the field he oversaw [ . . . ] a very condensation of time which was the gauge of his own violence, and he telling it in that pleasant faintly forensic anecdotal manner apparently just as he remembered it” (AA 312). For lack of any solid clues, the strange, indifferent and elliptical manner of his telling becomes symbolic of the man’s single-minded approach to his “design.”

There are many parallels which can be drawn between Sutpen’s described manner of storytelling and the style of the novel itself: The repetitive and a-chronological presentation of the novel mimics the style Quentin attributes to Sutpen.

He pulls his plantation out of the swamp, but he does not do it by himself: he has recourse to a French architect to produce the outward form of his design. This architect is a comical figure, as he is described by Mr. Compson to Quentin, with his “formal coat and his Paris hat and his expression of grim and embittered amazement.” Perhaps Sutpen’s need for the French architect is a figure for Faulkner’s own debt to continental writers, the “tricks of the trade” that he alluded to in the interview mentioned above. The allusions to French and European art Faulkner’s novel always emphasize the concern for style, for empty form. The French architect only constructs the facade, the empty shell of the home, the interior of which Sutpen must then finish and furnish.

This emphasis on appearance and empty form can be seen in Mr Compson’s description of Charles Bon, whom he depicts in the guise of a decadent European, an effeminate aesthete, with the “Frenchified cloak and hat which he wore, or perhaps (I like to think this) presented formally to the man reclining in a flowered, almost feminised

gown" (AA 117). Mr Compson's portrayal of Bon's funeral is filled with allusions to various forms of art and representation: Judith's mourning dress is "ceremonial widowhood's bright dramatic pageantry." The appearance of Charles Bon's octrooon mistress and child at his graveside "must have resembled a garden scene by the Irish poet, Wilde" (AA 241). The whole scene is described in terms of theatricality, the tombstones "looking as though they had been cleaned and polished and arranged by scene shifters who with the passing of twilight would return and strike them and carry them, hollow fragile and without weight, back to the warehouse until they should be needed again." The octrooon herself is described as "a woman created of by and for darkness, whom the artist Beardsley might have dressed, in a soft flowing gown designed not to infer bereavement or widowhood but to dress some interlude of slumbrous and fatal insatiation, of passionate and inexorable hunger of the flesh" (AA 242). The allusions to Wilde and Beardsley place everything surrounding Bon into a context of "decadence."

#### Being and Art: The Death of Bergotte

The work of art is traditionally considered a means for the artist to achieve a kind of immortality. Proust's text will put to question the thesis of art as a means of overcoming time without completely abandoning it. The Recherche is often read as a supreme example of a modernist esthetic which elevates and affirms the power of the artist and the value of the work of art. Indeed, in one passage of Le temps retrouvé the narrator proclaims paradoxically that "La vraie vie, la vie enfin découverte et éclaircie, la seule vie par conséquent pleinement vecue, c'est la littérature" (202), "Real life, life at last laid bare and illuminated—the only life in consequence which can be said to be really lived—is literature" (III: 931). The importance given to art and literature by the narrator is counterbalanced by an acute awareness of the mutability of the work of art, which is finally just as fragile and mortal as the human being who created it. The death of the fictional novelist Bergotte is an occasion for such reflection.

The question the narrator raises in the opening pages is left hanging for most of the novel, and will never be definitively resolved, although he does return to it at least once. It is unexpectedly taken up again in the fifth volume, in the presentation of the illness and death of the author Bergotte, who, is described as a “dying planet.”

Il allait ainsi se refroidissant progressivement, petite planète qui offrait une image anticipée des derniers jours de la grande quand, peu à peu, la chaleur se retirera de la Terre, puis la vie. Alors la résurrection aura pris fin, car si avant dans les générations futures que brillent les œuvres des hommes, encore faut-il qu'il y ait des hommes. Si certaines espèces animales résistent plus longtemps au froid envahisseur, quand il n'y aura plus d'hommes, et à supposer que la gloire de Bergotte ait duré jusque-là, brusquement elle s'éteindra à tout jamais. (P 173)

Thus he went on growing steadily colder, a tiny planet offering a prophetic image of the greater, when gradually heat will withdraw from the earth, then life itself. Then the resurrection will have come to an end, for, however far forward into future generations the works of men may shine, there must none the less be men. If certain species hold out longer against the invading cold, when there are no longer any men, and if we suppose Bergotte's fame to have lasted until then, suddenly it will be extinguished for all time. (III: 182)

Bergotte's death comes after after an attack he suffered upon his visit to an exposition featuring the Dutch painter Vermeer.<sup>64</sup>

un critique ayant écrit que dans la *Vue de Delft* de Ver Meer (prêté par le musée de La Haye pour une exposition hollandaise), tableau qu'il admirait et croyait connaître très bien), un petit pan de mur jaune (qu'il ne se rappelait pas), était si bien peint qu'il était, si on le regardait seul, comme une précieuse œuvre d'art chinoise, d'une beauté qui se suffirait à elle-même.

an art critic having written somewhere that in Vermeer's *View of Delft* (lent by the Gallery at The Hague for an exhibition of Dutch painting), a picture which he adored and imagined that he knew by heart, a little patch of yellow wall (which he could not remember) was so well painted that it was, if one looked at it by itself, like some priceless specimen of Chinese art, of a beauty that was sufficient in itself (III: 184 - 85)

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<sup>64</sup> This passage is apparently one that Proust wrote and added very late in the publication process of the *Recherche*, after his own visit to a Dutch exposition at the Jeu de Paume in 1921, during which time he suffered an attack of vertigo.



When he sees the painting in the museum, he is struck by a detail that the reviewer described, and which he previously hadn't noticed.: "Enfin il fut devant le Ver Meer qu'il se rappelait plus éclatant, plus différent de tout ce qu'il connaissait, mais où, grâce à l'article du critique, il remarqua pour la première fois des petits personnages en bleu, que le sable était rose, et enfin la précieuse matière du tout petit pan de mur jaune."

The exquisite detail of this "petit pan de mur" stands in opposition to the "pan lumineux" which the narrator associates with his voluntary memories of Combray. Bergotte, like Swann, is a double for the narrator, whose desire to be a writer is part of his fascination with the work of art and the world of the artist. Bergotte's reaction to the painting, influenced by the critic's review, shows him the weakness of his own powers of observation. Comparing the work of the Dutch artist to his own, he regrets his own lack of attention to detail.

«C'est ainsi que j'aurais dû écrire» disait-il. Mes derniers livres sont trop secs, il aurait fallu passer plusieurs couches de couleur, rendre ma phrase en elle-même précieuse, comme ce petit pan de mur jaune.» Cependant la gravité de ses étourdissements ne lui échappait pas. Dans une céleste balance lui apparaissait, chargeant l'un des plateaux, sa propre vie, tandis que l'autre contenait le petit pan de mur si bien peint en jaune. Il sentait qu'il avait imprudemment donné la première pour le seconde. (P 176)

"That's how I ought to have written," he said. "My last books are too dry, I ought to have gone over them with a few layers of color, made my language precious in itself, like this little patch of yellow wall" Meanwhile he was not unconscious of the gravity of his condition. In a celestial pair of scales there appeared to him, weighing down one of the pairs, his own life, while the other contained the little patch of wall so beautifully painted in yellow. He felt that he had rashly sacrificed the former for the latter. (III: 185)

The novelist's feeling of despair at this realization mirrors the hero's own incessant expression of regret at his inability to accurately observe and understand the world around him.

The episode of Bergotte's death is the occasion for a return to the question of death and immortality that was asked in the "Combray:" "Un nouveau coup l'abattit, il

roula du canapé par terre où accoururent tous les visiteurs et gardiens. Il était mort. Mort à jamais? Qui peut le dire? ” (P 176 - 77), “A fresh attack struck him down; he rolled from the settee to the floor, as visitors and attendants came hurrying to his assistance. He was dead. Dead forever? Who can say? (III: 185 - 86). This is exactly the same formula used in the “Ouverture,” in the reflections on the role of chance in human existence, and initiates a reflection upon the significance of the work of art and its power to express the unicity of the artist’s vision.

As Bergotte is buried, the image of his novels in shop windows is the occasion for a meditation on the role of work of art in conferring immortality: “On l’enterra, mais toute la nuit funèbre, aux vitrines éclairées, ses livres, disposées trois par trois, veillaient comme des anges aux ailes éployées et semblaient pour celui qui n’était plus, le symbole de sa résurrection” (177). This image is incongruous with the narrator’s earlier statement that “l’immortalité n’est pas plus promis aux hommes qu’aux œuvres.” The question of art’s ability to transcend death remains unresolved until the hero’s second major revelatory experience of involuntary memory in Le temps retrouvé.

#### Voice, Interweaving, Intertextuality

The motif of the written letter can also serve as a form of literary self-reflection. In Faulkner’s work, it is also through the use of letters and the dramatization of storytelling as an oral practice that he self-references his work as text. The novel portrays the circulation of the letter in the passage of the story from mouth to ear and from hand to hand. One might say that it is the status of the letter which is at stake in Thomas Sutpen’s efforts to establish a lign of dukes which might perpetuate his family name. The novel portrays the circulation of the letter in the passage of the story from mouth to ear and from hand to hand. According to Patrick McGee, there are a total of eight missives mentioned in Asbalom, Absalom!, two of which are reproduced in their entirety in the novel: Mr. compson’s letter to Quentin at Harvard, in which he informs his son of Miss Rosa Coldfield’s death (217 - 18, 470), and Charles Bon’s unsigned letter to Judith

Sutpen during the Civil War, which Judith is said to have given to Quentin's grandmother (AA 160 - 63). These letters function as mirrors for the novel itself. The letter from Mr Compson to his son is reproduced in two parts which are separated by 252 pages of text. Its conclusion is held in suspension for half the novel, like many of the actions detailed in the story.

In the letter Judith Sutpen receives from Charles Bon, which she subsequently gives to Quentin's grandmother, As Pat McGee notes, "Absalom, Absalom! analyzes a language that has been diverted from its end." Written with stove polish on paper which was equally plundered from Yankee troops.

Mr Compson imagines the letter "to embody the thing he looks for by narrating, the missing explanation."<sup>65</sup> In chapter IV, he speculates about what Judith said when she entrusted Quentin's grandmother with the letter she had received from Charles Bon.

'Yes,' Judith said. 'Or destroy it. As you like. Read it if you like or don't read it if you like. Because you make so little impression, you see. You get born and you try this and you don't know why only you keep on trying it and you are born at the same time with a lot of other people, all mixed up with them, like trying to, having to, move your arms and legs with strings only the same strings are hitched to all the other arms and legs and the others all trying and they don't know why either except that the strings are all in one another's way like five or six people all trying to make a rug on the same loom only each one want to weave his own pattern into the rug; and it can't matter, you know that, or the Ones that set up the loom would have arranged things a little better, and yet it must matter because you keep on trying or having to keep on trying and then all of a sudden it's all over and all you have left is a block of stone with scratches on it provided there was someone to remember to have the marble scratched and set up or had time to, and it rains on it and the sun shines on it and after a while they don't even remember the name and what the scratches were trying to tell, and it doesn't matter.' (AA 157-58)

In this speech, Judith expresses a relationship to the letter in which the subject is born into a social web, in which her place is determined by others. The metaphor of the loom is a figure for the social "fabric" which connects her to others. It is also an image of

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<sup>65</sup> Pat McGee, Telling the Other: The Question of Value in Modern and Postcolonial Writing, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992) 44.

textuality, of language, which is “woven” by one and all, but in which autonomy is difficult. Judith Surpen admits the subject’s inability to control the status of the letter by giving it to Mrs Compson. As a woman, Judith certainly enjoys much less autonomy than her father, or brother, on whom she is dependent for the realization of her own goals. Likewise, she does not speak in the text of the novel. Her voice is caught up in the voices of Mr. Compson, General Compson and the General’s wife. This soliloquy on the transfer of Bon’s letter is an expression of the intertextual nature of existence in the letter. The moment of passage of the letter is thus highly symbolic.

In Judith’s speech, Faulkner expresses the intersubjective nature of human existence. The weaving of the loom is an image used by Richard Rorty, who urges us to think of human minds “as webs of beliefs and desires, of sentential attitudes—webs which continually reweave themselves so as to accommodate new sentential attitudes” [. . .]. He goes so far as to suggest that “there is no self distinct from this self-reweaving web. All there is to the human self is just that web.”<sup>66</sup> The metaphor of the web is appropriate for narration, which has long been associated with the act of weaving. Consciousness can thus be thought of as the ongoing rewriting of the self; or better, the act of writing itself. Identity is an unfinished text, artificially and arbitrarily fixed by the closure of the book, the finality of death.<sup>67</sup>

It is possible to read Mr. Compson’s own fatalism in this speech he attributes retrospectively to Judith. The faded writing on the tombstones is also a figure for the work of art as a text, and in light of our reading of Faulkner through Proust, it echoes a Proustian metaphor: “un livre est un grand cimetière où sur la plupart des tombes on ne peut plus lire les noms effacés” (TR 210) “a book is a huge cemetery in which on the majority of the tombs the names are effaced and can no longer be read” (III: 940).

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<sup>66</sup> “Inquiry as Recontextualization: An Anti-dualist Account of Interpretation,” Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, vol. 1, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 93.

<sup>67</sup> Walter Benjamin claims that “Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death” (94).

### The French Architect

The plantation and especially the house built by Sutpen, with the help of the French architect, is a symbol for the writer's creation, the book itself. The architect is described as an artist by General Compson: "[. . .] he was a good architect. Quentin knew the house, twelve miles from Jefferson [. . .]. And not only an architect, as General Compson said, but an artist since only an artist could have borne those two years in order to build a house which he doubtless not only expected but firmly intended never to see again" (AA 43). This would make the house a work of art, a *mise en abyme* for the literary edifice constructed by an author such as Faulkner. The novel suggests this possibility when the ghost of Sutpen is said to inhabit Miss Rosa's voice "where a more fortunate one would have had a house" (AA 4). Narrative, or rather "voice" is here shown to usurp the function of the house, the place of residence for beings, or being in general.

Here artistic creation is predicated on renouncement of any desire for prestige or immortality. He is a comical figure "in his formal coat and his Paris hat and his expression of grim and embittered amazement." His finery is juxtaposed with Sutpen and the wild Haitians caked in mud as protection against mosquitos. He is out of his element -- more of an absolute other in the context of Yoknapatawpha than the Haitians themselves: Sutpen certainly gets along better with the Negroes than with the architect, working alongside them and engaging in sportive fist fights with them. Roles seem to have been reversed when we see Sutpen and the slaves tracking the runaway architect with bloodhounds through the swamps.

Architecture is also used frequently in Proust as a metaphor for the work of art: In the lengthy development of the esthetics of his novel in Le temps retrouvé, the book the narrator hopes to write is likened to a cathedral:

Et dans ces grands livres-là, il y a des parties qui n'ont eu le temps que d'être esquissées, et qui ne seront sans doute jamais finies, à cause de l'ampleur même du plan de l'architecte. Combien de grandes cathédrales restent inachevées! On le nourrit, on fortifie ses parties faibles, on le

préserve, mais ensuite c'est lui qui grandit, qui désigne notre tombe, la protège contre les rumeurs et quelque temps contre l'oubli. (TR 337 - 38)

And in long books of this kind there are parts which there has been time only to sketch, parts which, because of the very amplitude of the architect's plan, will no doubt never be completed. How many great cathedrals remain unfinished! The writer feeds his book, he strengthens the parts of it which are weak, he protects it, but afterwards it is the book that grows that designates its author's tomb and defends it against the world's clamour and for a while against oblivion. (III: 1089)

Here again it is notable that one of the main points of similarity between the cathedral and the work of art as conceived by the narrator, is its essentially *unfinished* nature. The enormity of such an undertaking will mean an unending task for the artist. The work demands a superhuman effort which, when is inevitably interrupted by the death. The (un)finished work "designating" the absence of the artist in its missing elements, has the function of a grave marker.

Art is finally overpowered by the forces of nature in the form of death, and the forces of entropy which resist and erode the structures imposed on its elements. Surpen pulls his planation out of the primal mud, but is unable to insure its perpetuation. Similarly, Miss Rosa, Mr. Compson, Quentin and finally Shreve all attempt to construct a narrative about Surpen, but no one of them is able to adequately put all the pieces together. The inability of the various narrators to adequately reconstruct the Surpen legend is, as many critics have noted, a commentary on the status of history itself. History, like memory is not immutable; it is subject to all the effects of forgetting and revision of conscious memory. As we have seen, Proust spends whole volumes explicitly reflecting on the fragility of memory, in the slow progression of the hero's forgetting about Albertine. Miss Rosa also laments the fading of memory: "*Ay grief goes, fades; we know that—but ask the tear ducts if they have forgotten how to weep.*" But Miss Rosa has a morbid obsession with preserving memory which prevents her from adapting and living in the present. This is underscored by her description in the opening pages of the novel, by the rigidity of her posture and the stillness of the setting in her "office." She is in an

arrested state of mourning, in the “eternal black which she had worn for forty-three years now, whether for sister, father, or no husband none knew, sitting so bolt upright in the straight hard chair that was so tall for her that her legs hung straight and rigid as if she had iron shinbones and ankles, clear of the floor with that air of impotent and static rage like children’s feet” (AA 3-4). The immobility of Miss Rosa, dwarfed by the chair in which she sits, suggests her mentally and emotionally frozen attitude.

### Conclusion: The Identity Crisis of Literary Studies

The crisis of identity which I have been illustrating in the novels of William Faulkner and Marcel Proust is a problem that also faces what we call literary “studies,” which seek to differentiate themselves from the fictional texts and documents upon which it operates. Inquiry into the nature of identity is itself subject to the recontextualization which “research” engenders. Any inquiry into the meaning of being must quickly find itself confronted with the question of the meaning of meaning. It is inevitably the way we formulate the question which will determine the answers we find. Indeed all we ever seem to be able to do is continually reformulate the question according to the ever-changing contexts from which we approach it.

It is difficult, from our perspective, to understand the novelty of Proust’s work. We are a generation which has been weaned on the billboard, the sound bite and the video clip. Proust’s poetics become our poetics—a poetics of continual revision, and recontextualization.

Richard Rorty calls Proust and Nietzsche “ironists” because, he says, they “are quite aware that what counts as resolution, perfection, and autonomy will always be a function of when one happens to die or to go mad. But this relativity does not entail futility. For there is no big secret which the ironist hopes to discover, and which he might die or decay before discovering. There are only little mortal things to be rearranged by being redescribed. If he had been alive or sane longer, there would have been more material to be rearranged, and thus different redescriptions, but there would never have been the right description. For although the thoroughgoing ironist can use the notion of a ‘better description,’ he has no criterion for the application of this term and so cannot use the notion of ‘the right description.’ ”<sup>68</sup> Proust’s hero is portrayed as continually being

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<sup>68</sup> Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony and Solidarity, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 99.



the victim of the desire to discover a big secret. One of the ways of distinguishing the “hero” from the “narrator” is the way in which the latter ironizes about this desire.

Marcel Proust corresponds perfectly to Rorty’s description of the “thoroughgoing ironist.” His narrator’s ideas about people and places are continually subject to correction and re-interpretation. Although he is said to have announced with joy to his housekeeper the moment when he wrote the word “fin” on his manuscript, he actually continued revising, rewriting and rearranging little bits and pieces of his novel right up until the moment of his death; and, while “Marcel” attempts to identify himself through the repetition and construction of a narrative about his specific historical and cultural context, identity and contexts are ultimately shown to be unstable constructs continually woven out of the disparate shards of memory and language. Identity is always incomplete, requiring a supplement of narration, of writing. Being as well as meaning in this narrative is forever differed, qualified, contingent, and reversible. It is dependent on contexts which themselves are forever changing. This is what Proust refers to as “le kaléidoscope social” (CG I, 181).

Much of what we consider our identity is a response to inquiry, a set of questions and answers about our past and present conditions—a narrative. The answers may not be the same in every circumstance. Our story cannot fully be told. It is not only inexhaustible, but continually “self-modifying” (that is to say that it modifies itself, which is our “self” in the very act of telling that self). It is an act of self-creation. It is us writing our selves, a kind of fiction in which fiction becomes reality. Signs become beings or vice versa. It is this same being we allude to when we talk about the style of Marcel Proust. But an identity that is based in a certain style of language, in a certain manipulation of signs, say, in what you say or wear, in the letters you write, is far different from an identity based on an immutable, essential self. What this style shows is not the idiosyncrasies of some “individual” consciousness, but rather the melding of idiosyncrasy into the impersonal stream of unconscious mechanisms: mechanisms of

condensation and displacement, of association and combination, of synchrony and diachrony in other words, of language.

Identity is in a practical sense indistinguishable from narration, that is from the active functioning of language as it unceasingly constructs and deconstructs memory, consciousness or history. There can be no essence to identity; it can never be definitive when it is seen as a function of language. Nor can identity be grasped as a whole, complete and self-sufficient. The conscious narrative reconstruction of personal identity is never complete, never satisfactory. It always requires further development, more narration, more text. Hence the exponential growth of Proust's work. It's safe to say that A la recherche du temps perdu is a novel that Proust worked on all his life. But Proust remains undaunted by the theoretical impossibilities of a definitive text. Indeed, Proust's narrator expresses an admiration for the "great unfinished works" of the nineteenth century (P 150; III: 157). The novel remains much more fragmented and inconsistent than we like to admit.

Nearly every time Proust's narrator alludes to great art of the past, whether it be the art of the eighteenth or the nineteenth century, he admires in it its broken, unfinished, asymmetrical character, which nevertheless follows a rigorous, if hidden, plan and attempts to adhere to a definite structure. It is the deformation of that structure, and its need to be recuperated in an act of reading, which he admires.

The description of the Hubert Robert fountain, early in the narrator's entry into the salon of the Princesse de Guermantes at the beginning of Sodome et Gomorrhe is just one among many examples of the kind of *mise en abyme* of the work of art which is repeated again and again in the novel:

Dans une clarière réservée par de beaux arbres dont plusieurs étaient aussi anciens que lui, planté à l'écart, on le voyait de loin, svelte, immobile, durci, ne laissant agiter par la brise que la retombée plus légère de son panache pâle et frémissant. Le XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle avait épurée l'élégance de ses lignes, mais, fixant le style du jet, semblait en avoir arrêté la vie; à cette distance, on avait l'impression de l'art plutôt que la sensation de l'eau.

It could be seen from a distance, slender, motionless, rigid, set apart in a clearing surrounded by fine trees, several of which were as old as itself, only the lighter fall of its pale and quivering plume stirring in the breeze. The eighteenth century had refined the elegance of its lines, but, by fixing the style of the jet, seemed to have arrested its life; at this distance one had the impression of art rather than the sensation of water.

The fountain is set apart from its surroundings, a relic of a past age with no apparent connection to the present. The fixity of its appearance denotes a coldness and a lifelessness which Marcel associates here with eighteenth century art.

The fountain becomes symbolic for the narrator, of the artistic heritage of the eighteenth century: “Le nuage humide lui-même qui s’amoncelait perpétuellement à son faite gardait le caractère de l’époque comme ceux qui dans le ciel s’assemblent autour des palais de Versailles.” “Even the moist cloud that was perpetually gathering at its summit preserved the character of the period like those that assemble in the sky round the palaces of Versailles.” The dyad of art and nature, set up by this passage, is reversed by an optical effect dependent upon proximity, which reveals details not seen from a distance, thus contradicting the assertion that it “can be seen” from a distance. The view the narrator has from a distance is arguably not sight, but blindness. The ability to see is critically dependent on the ability to see the *details*.

Mais de près on se rendait compte que tout en respectant, comme les pierres d’un palais antique, le dessin préalablement tracé, c’était des eaux toujours nouvelles, s’élançant et voulant obéir aux ordres anciens de l’architecte, ne les accomplissaient exactement qu’en paraissant les violer, leurs mille bonds épars pouvant seuls donner à distance l’impression d’un unique élan. Celui-ci était en réalité aussi souvent interrompu que l’éparpillement de la chute, alors que, de loin, il m’avait paru inflexible, dense, d’une continuité sans lacune. (SG 56)

But from a closer view one realised that, while it respected, like the stones of an ancient palace, the design traced for it beforehand, it was a constantly changing stream of water that springing upwards and seeking to obey the architect’s original orders, performed them to the letter only by seeming to infringe them, its thousand separate bursts succeeding only from afar in giving the impression of a single thrust. This was in reality as often interrupted as the scattering of the fall, whereas from a distance it had appeared to me dense, inflexible, unbroken in its continuity (II: 680)

The description of this fountain alludes to the French Revolution and to characteristics of the Baroque architecture of the period, with its adherence to certain traits of classical architecture, but which displayed increasingly broken and asymmetrical features as the century progressed. The allusion to eighteenth century art's form and aesthetics, through the sculpted waters of this fountain, has immediate relevance and impact upon the Proustian text in which it is placed. This fountain is a work of art whose "roots" are said to be plunged deep into the character of the century: Like the art of that century it displays a definite form a "pre-inscribed design" which is nevertheless broken and disrupted by the "thousand scattered splashes" of water, only giving the impression of a completed whole "from a distance." The image of clouds gathering in the sky above the Palace of Louis XIV at Versailles opposes the orderly chaos of the natural process of cloud formation with the period's architectural triumph in the grandiose building and gardens. It opposes the order imposed by man to the chaotic order of the natural, which is framed and domesticated by the buildings and gardens. Again and again, the narrator expresses his admiration for this melding of order and disorder, of artifice and nature, in the work of art.

#### The Figure of the Author

The desire to write about the novels of Marcel Proust and William Faulkner was brought about as much by a fascination with the figures of Faulkner and Proust as with the texts themselves. In spite of all formalist injunctions to concentrate on the text, and nothing but the text, to study a novel by one of these authors is almost invariably at some point, to study the figures of the authors themselves. Proust and Faulkner as proper names are caught up in a series of cultural significations and connotations which often find their way into the writings of biographers, historians, and critics. We are assured by all those who propose to speak about them that the authors themselves sought a kind of invisibility, stepping back to let their works speak for themselves. Proust actively denied that any models were to be found in reality for the characters in his novels. Yet his efforts

were to be in vain, as there continues to be a general preoccupation with biographical details, one that can be seen in the success of biographies as well as books containing interviews, personal correspondence, tales of the publishing history of their works, and even photographs of people who are supposed to have served as models for some of Proust's characters.

The wealth of books devoted to these authors testifies to a kind of fascination with them which shows no signs of waning. This fixation on biography ironically mimics the very obsession of their main characters with others in the novels.

What is peculiar about the twentieth century is not so much the desire, as the availability of access to the personal letters, details and anecdotes of the famous. Thus the author who mocked Sainte-Beuve for judging an artist's life rather than his work and who went out of his way to insist that the characters in his book were purely fictitious, that the Recherche was not a *roman à clés*, is the object of "pilgrimages" to the little village of Illiers-Combray, site of one of Proust's aunt's house, and the "Musée de Tante Léonie" named after the fictional aunt of the narrator of the Recherche. In Normandy, the Grand Hôtel of Cabourg, supposed to be the model for the "Grand Hôtel de Balbec," touts its "chambre Marcel Proust" its Restaurant Balbec, and its "petites madeleines." As Gray demonstrates, these mass cultural appropriations of Proust invariably act to simplify, to tame the alterity of the monstrous Proustian text, reducing it to the simplest of images: that of the petite madeleine.

Proust added to the confusion, not only by twice inserting his own given name in the definitive version of the novel, but also in his letters and interviews, by freely speaking in the first person of the narrator of the Recherche, and especially by using events which he actually experienced in the narrative. Faulkner, too, seems to justify such biographical approaches when he affirms that "every time any character gets into a book, no matter how minor, he's actually telling his own biography, talking about himself, in a thousand

different terms, but himself" [. . .] (FIU 275). According to this theory, narration is itself, by definition, autobiography.

There is a certain interpretation of the literary object in which the illusion of being as presence is maintained, through the figure of the author as origin and master of his work. Heidegger speaks of this in "The Origin of the Work of Art"

On the usual view, the work arises out of and by means of the activity of the artist. But by what and whence is the artist what he is? By the work; for to say that the work does credit to the master means that it is the work that first lets the artist emerge as a master of his art. The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist.<sup>69</sup>

The author is the origin of the work, through which he expresses himself. Proust's narrator's conclusion in Le temps retrouvé is that the work of art is a work of art because it is the expression of a unique universe, the vision of the individual artist. We cannot, however look to the historical figure of Proust to understand his text. To do so would be to betray him, for it is precisely for this sort of interpretation that he reproached the predominant nineteenth century French critic Sainte-Beuve. It is, instead, through the work of art, that the artist becomes himself.

The figure of the author inevitably manifests itself, and even seems to be inscribed in the language that must be employed to speak about their works. The vocabulary of criticism posits the "Faulknerian" and the "Proustian" characteristics of their object texts, as if there were a unique Proustian or Faulknerian *style*, a textual form which functioned as *essence*. Yet A la recherche du temps perdu demonstrates through pastiche that style remains impersonal, because, as a mere function of discourse it is available to appropriations, and/or assumed almost unconsciously from the corpus of common knowledge.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Martin Heidegger, Basic Writings, Ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 149.

<sup>70</sup> Alexandre Leupin argues this in his introduction to Lacan and the Human Sciences. "Proust proved by the pastiche that style has nothing to do with the subject as such, since it can be integrally repeated: hence the Recherche, which is disconnected from style and literature. In other words there is a Proustian program according to which the disappearance of literature should be the rise of the pure letter" (p. 40).

### Language and Chaos

The fascination with the man seeks to mask, or to remedy the complex, intertextual nature of subjectivity in these novels. The author is invariably posited as the controlling gaze that brings into being the cosmos portrayed in his texts.<sup>71</sup> The belief in the existence of the author as a controller of the world he has created, as the god which breathes life into his characters, provides a convenient identity on which to ground the figural play in the novels, since the narrators' gazes in these works are decidedly not in control of the worlds they are narrating. It is rather voice, as a manifestation of impersonal discourse, as the functioning of the symbolic, which controls them. The "consciousness" of these characters is a fluctuating narrative construction of memory and sensation, remembered voices and remembered *texts*. Knowledge of the self, of who one is, is shown to be contingent upon the tenuousness of memory and sensation.

We nevertheless continue to speak of the authorial "voice" in the texts concerned. The difficulty with which different voices can be distinguished from one another in these novels is often obscured by the attribution of the enunciation as a whole to this authorial voice. The "Faulknerian" and the "Proustian" serve as metaphors for the writer as controlling subject/presence "behind" or "inside" his work. The invocation of the author's name serves to rescue the concept of individuality and the subject at the same time. Thus, even if subjectivity in these novels is represented as "decentered," "fractured" or even lost, the "world" of these novels is seen as a harmoniously assembled whole, built out of an authorial vision, a "universe." It is "Faulkner's" Yoknapatawpha, "Proust's" France.

In spite of all formalist criticism's claims to study the *text*, it is difficult to ignore the *context* of the author's life. It is obviously impossible due to the laws of copyright, to reproduce or to represent a text *without* linking it to its proper author, as if the text were

<sup>71</sup> On the author's "controlling gaze" see Philip M. Weinstein, Faulkner's Subject: A Cosmos No One Owns, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

somehow the property of the author: "William Faulkner, sole owner and proprietor." Is there any way for criticism around this blind spot? Would be possible to speak of Recherche without mentioning the name of the author? Not without a complete reconsideration of the concept of the "work" as well. In the introduction to his structuralist analysis of Proust's work, Genette affirms that "In its debate with literary history, modern criticism [. . .] has attempted to separate the concepts of work and author with the completely understandable tactical approach of opposing the former to the latter, which has been the cause of so many excessive and sometimes worrisome activities. Now we have begun to understand that they are mutually dependent, and that every form of criticism is necessarily caught up in the circle of their reciprocal movement."<sup>72</sup> Yet Genette insists, as well he should, that the study of the author's biography, the research into sources, and influences, as well as into the genesis and destiny of the works, remains secondary to ("à côté de") the main interest of literary studies. The fundamental interest says the formalist, is the *text*. But the formalist must constantly make reference to the author. The author as a construct of critical or even biographical discourse has the same status as any character in the work, whether they be the "hero" the "narrator" or other characters. These figures are constructs of language, produced by texts. The person of the author, as a historical entity, is always absent from his creation. "He who writes the work," says Marice Blanchot, is set aside:

It closes in around his absence as the impersonal anonymous affirmation that it is—and nothing more. This is what is meant by the observation that the writer, since he only finishes his work at the moment he dies, never

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<sup>72</sup> "Dans son débat avec l'histoire littéraire, la critique moderne depuis un demi-siècle s'est appliquée à séparer les notions d'*oeuvre* et d'*auteur* dans le dessein tactique fort compréhensible d'opposer la première à la seconde, responsable de tant d'excès et d'activités parfois oiseuses. On commence à percevoir aujourd'hui qu'elles ont partie liée, et que toute forme de critique est nécessairement prise dans le cercle de leur renvoi réciproque" "In its debate with literary history, modern criticism for a half-century has attempted to separate the notions of author and work with the very understandable tactical goal of opposing the latter to the former which is often responsible for so many excesses and sometimes bothersome activities. Today we begin to see that they are linked to one another and that any form of criticism is necessarily caught in the circle of their mutual return" (Figures III 10). My translation.



knows of his work. One ought perhaps to turn this remark around. For isn't the writer dead as soon as the work exists?<sup>73</sup>

the author is dismissed from it as soon as it is created. Once the work has entered the world, it has an autonomous existence. "The writer's only real relation to what we call the work," says Blanchot, is his inability to read it (23).

The definition of the "text," however, is also open to question. No longer can criticism afford to ignore the social, cultural and historical contexts in which literature is situated and in which it attempts to situate itself. If we are to accept the implications of what Derrida affirms in "Structure sign and Play" or what Barthes suggests in his theorization of the "readerly" and the "writerly," the field of textual "play" opened up by these works increases considerably. As Hayles puts it in her discussion of deconstructive criticism: "As books became texts, they were transformed from ordered sets of words to permeable membranes through which flowed the currents of history, language and culture. Always already lacking a ground for their systems of signification, texts were not deterministic or predictable. Instead they were capable of becoming unstable whenever the slightest perturbation was introduced" (2).

The way that we read these novels, like the ways we identify the literary figures Marcel Proust and William Faulkner, is itself constantly changing, being, as it is, the absorption and transformation of other people's previous readings coupled with our own previous knowledge of other texts. The pursuit of a correct, or "appropriate" reading of such texts (or the truth about the author's life), is a useless endeavor, and no one knew that better than the writers themselves. The models of interpretation and reading presented in these texts emphasize this again and again, yet we continue to speak of the men Marcel Proust and William Faulkner as if we had failed to learn the lessons about identity contained in their novels: "every reading where consideration of the writer seems

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<sup>73</sup> Maurice Blanchot The Space of Literature, trans. Ann Smock, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982) 22, 23.

to play so great a role is an attack which annihilates him in order to give the work back to itself: back to its anonymous presence, to the violent, impersonal affirmation that it is" (Blanchot 193). The William Faulkner and Marcel Proust we produce in our own critical, historical or biographical narratives are often little more than constructions fashioned in order to make some point about literature, history or art.

My interest in these writers is ultimately due to the canonical status they hold in their respective national literatures. It grew from the suspicion that this status is due to the projection of something essential, solid and unchanging about their works, about the figures Marcel Proust and William Faulkner, and about identities, whether they be thought of in terms of nationality, race, culture, language or individual personality. It is my argument that this kind of reading of these texts, of the men, or of history betray the lessons which can be learned from their texts.

The central figure in each of these novels attempts to reconstitute a coherent point of view, a subject position which will enable him to make sense of the series of unstable narratives which envelop him. Their desire for the "truth" is continually deferred and hampered by the ever-shifting nature of their perceptions and the symbolic field itself. In other words they seek a way clear through a "chaos" of perceptual and symbolic phenomena.

The reader of either of these two works is presented with lacuna and anachronies which signal not unity, but the fragmentation and artificiality of memory. It is as if the authors of these novels set about purposely confounding chronology in order to demonstrate the total indifference of conscious mechanisms to linear time. Consciousness is susceptible to the fluctuations, inconsistencies and degradation of time, but the latter is just as often an illusion invented by the former.

Faulkner, like Proust, shows how individuals are thrown into an ever-fluctuating sea of sign systems, especially those of language and narrative. They demonstrate that being in the world is not based in some essential self, but in the absorption and transformation

of a certain number of discourses, the continual reworking of histories both personal and communal. The self in these works is thus permeated by language, by what psychoanalysis calls “the field of the other.” These novels are thus concerned with representing, not beings engaged in concrete actions, but the process of remembering as it structures consciousness. Or, to put it another way, they attempt to represent *representation*. Consciousness is treated as phenomenon: the mechanisms of perception are inseparable from that which is perceived. The self is constructed by the field of its own perception. The model of consciousness which emerges is altogether different from the concept of the individual as unique, or self-knowing, and calls into question the subject as well as the object of thought.

Identity in Proust and Faulkner is a function of narrative. The story of the self is produced in the act of storytelling. The individual is never able to “master” these discourses, just as no one is able to master the narrative of Thomas Sutpen in Absalom, Absalom!, much as they may try. Similarly, Proust’s narrator spends most of his time and most of the novel looking for the “essence” of art, and for the mystery of other people’s “true” identities. The discovery Proust’s narrator makes is that through writing, by actively recreating the world, he can (re)arrange his own story. But this final arrangement cannot be definitive. This explains the repetitive, revisionist nature of his texts.

The structures of Proust and Faulkner’s novels bear some striking resemblances. Both texts work by the accumulation of details rather than the presentation of facts. The syntagmatic, diegetic narrative plays a much less significant role than in Proust’s novel, which is partially the story of the hero’s education, and therefore retains a chronological organization. In The Sound and the Fury, the various sections are deliberately given out of chronological order. In Absalom, Absalom, the diegetic framework is weak, consisting mainly of people talking. Quentin first listens to Miss Rosa and his father tell him the story, in Mississippi. Then he tells the same story to his Canadian roommate at

Harvard several months later. The actions of this frame narrative take place in a very limited time period.

In place of a chronological development, there is an uncontrolled proliferation of narrative. This narrative is repetitive—the same events are retold innumerable times, while in Proust, repeated actions tend to be told in the synthetic mode, as exemplary, a kind of summary of repeated events. Things that used to happen repeatedly are told once. The logical or chronological development of action from beginning to end is not as important as the potentially infinite series of repetitions and variations. This type of structure is based not on logic and necessity, but on association and contingency. The privileging of association over causality or chronology is equivalent to the privileging of paradigm over syntagm and of chance over necessity, and opens up the narrative to multiple readings and interpretations. What Proust and Faulkner have done is to suggest the infinite complexity and unpredictability of human behavior.

The study of literature is often subject to its own form of identity crisis, one which is not unrelated to the very instability that I seek to point out in my chosen texts. It would seem then that, at the risk of betraying the works concerned, criticism must be condemned to a kind of schizophrenia. What is the object of literary criticism? Of literary history (of any history)? The text? the context? the reception? the genesis? the author? the intertext? all of these are, in different ways, valid answers. The multiplicity of the “object” of literary studies can not but help bring about a fragmentation of the subject (the “voice” of the critical text itself). Critical texts must now simultaneously interrogate themselves as well as their chosen “primary text.” The choice of a certain perspective from which to interpret the literary text inevitably will determine the type of interpretation produced. Proust, too, made this danger explicit in passages which dissect the act of reading: (“En réalité, chaque lecteur est quand il lit le propre lecteur de soi-même”).

Are we then condemned to see only ourselves in the “mirror” of the text? The opposite danger is also present: like Borges’ Pierre Menard attempting to write (not to rewrite) Cervantes’ Don Quixote, we may find ourselves attempting to follow the text so closely that we are condemned to repeat it word for word, identifying our discourse with it much as the young Marcel identifies himself with “a church,” “a quarter,” or “the rivalry between François I and Charles Quint.”

It is inevitable then that we begin with the conclusion. We write, as Proust did, the beginning and the end at the same moment, and fill in the middle as a function of our end. The danger here is that we might only be capable of seeing only what we have posited. Proust knew this. To read is to produce a text from what we have internalized through previous experiences of other texts. So full of this previous input are we, that everything we read seems ripe with meaning: “A partir d’un certain âge nos souvenirs sont tellement entre-croisés les uns sur les autres que la chose à laquelle on pense, le livre qu’on lit n’a presque plus d’importance. On a mis de soi-même partout, tout est fécond, tout est dangereux, et on peut faire d’aussi précieuses découvertes que dans les Pensées de Pascal dans une reclame pour un savon” (AD 124). “After a certain age our memories are so intertwined We have put something of ourselves everywhere, everything is fertile, everything is dangerous, and we can make discoveries no less precious than in Pascal’s Pensées in an advertisement for soap” (III: 553 - 54).

From which point of view must we approach these texts? The answer to this question must inevitably influence the nature of what will be found. Is it possible to delve into the text without any preconceived notions of what is to be found there, without imposing an order so as to discover order? Perhaps only if the order we impose is simultaneously disorderly, if it contains the possibility of its own unraveling?

For the would-be “Faulknerian” or “Proustian,” critic, and in a world in which the scientific pursuit of the “Truth” of the text, its correct reading, is no longer credible, the sanction for undertaking yet still another study of these seemingly well-worn texts

can only be its *effectiveness* as performance: "The sanction of the critic," as Roland Barthes points out in *Critique et vérité*, "is not the meaning of the work, it is the meaningfulness of what he says about the work" (65).<sup>74</sup> *Le sens* here must be understood not only as meaning but as coherence. All of these terms are themselves disappointingly vague. What exactly does "coherence" imply? Its meaning can be (at least) double: Firstly, the critical or text must agree with its object text. It must not stray too far from the "letter" of that text. The "close" reading is an exercise which partakes in this attempt to reduce the distance between art and interpretation and to insure the validity of the latter by somehow anchoring it in the former.

This requirement betrays its dependence upon a traditional metaphysical presupposition which unites the spirit and the letter in the "logos." The spirit of the interpretation is the letter of the original text. The critical task is that of an *translator* who must be faithful to the original, to reproduce faithfully and without distortion, to be *transparent*. It is in this sense that Barthes's statement secretly reintroduces the criterion of truth-value into the critical endeavor. Contemporary critical theory is postulated on the assumption of the radical absence of, or at least the inability to determine, philosophical truths. The metaphysical presuppositions upon which the "Truth" is often established must be taken as presuppositions, that is, subject to revision. The "Truth," in the singular and with a capital, is perhaps a dangerously fascist notion. The field of speculative knowledge is made up of a multitude of "truths," more properly called "hypotheses" which form a web of constantly shifting relations, and which therefore resists the logic of completion. Truth is now seen as contingent, relative, and reversible. It cannot easily be consumed and digested, for it is continually reproduced.

The problem of identity in these novels, and the resultant unreliability of their narrative voices, do not leave the fields of textual criticism or history unaffected. The

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<sup>74</sup> My translation.

critic or literary historian's task is also to chart a path through the confusing and sometimes contradictory disorder of the text. If only for the purpose of constructing a coherent commentary, the critical text cannot permit itself the licence of the literary text. Faced with the work of literature, the critic is in much the same position as the central character in each of these novels: Quentin Compson trying to reconstruct and understand the Surpen story, and the insomniac "Marcel" attempting to identify himself and his surroundings. Both are intent on producing a masterly version of a discourse of identity. The extent to which they, and we, are confronted with what seems like chaos can be seen in the kind of trouble Proust had in convincing his early readers that there was indeed a hidden order to be found in the seemingly random associations of his narrative. In a letter to Paul Souday in 1919 he deplores this assumption: "Je vois des lecteurs s'imaginer que j'écris, en me fiant à d'arbitraires et fortuites associations d'idées, l'histoire de ma vie," "I see readers imagining that I'm writing my life's story, entrusting myself to arbitrary and fortuitous associations of ideas." Later on in that same year he writes to Jean-Louis Vaudoyer, complaining of reviewers who, he says, failed to recognize the tight composition of his work, and seemed to be saying that he had written his memoirs following the tenuous thread of his recollections. "méconnaissant la composition serrée de mon ouvrage, ont l'air de dire que je fais des Mémoires et écris au fil de mes souvenirs!"<sup>75</sup>

### The Thread of Association

The difficulty many first-time readers encounter with Proust can be described as an impression of the "chaotic" nature of the text. The intricate embedded sentences and perceived lack of plot direction has no doubt caused many readers to abandon the text after only a few pages.

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<sup>75</sup> Qtd. in Thierry Laget, *Thierry Laget présente Du côté de chez Swann de Marcel Proust*, (Paris: Gallimard [Folio] 1992) 29.

What is generally the reproach made in this case? That the plot has no direction, or more precisely, that it advances through an arbitrary pattern “au fil des associations.” It is not so much the associations which are disturbing, as the “thread.” It seems fortuitous, arbitrary, haphazard, unmotivated. But it is precisely the genius of Proust to demonstrate that the motivation comes after. It is only a function of a “conscious” (and thus artificial) retrospective reconstruction. The waking sleeper has no idea which room he is in; he has no idea in which rooms he has slept until *after* they have risen to his consciousness. The present is only a function of that act of remembering which brings the “past” into the present. This is what he admired in the compositional style of Ruskin, who, he said, “goes from one idea to the next without any apparent order. But in reality the fancy which leads him follows his deep affinities which impose upon him, in spite of himself, a superior logic. So that, in the end, he seems to have obeyed a secret plan, which, once revealed, imposes retrospectively a kind of order upon the whole and makes it seem magnificently arrayed to lead to its final apotheosis.” What Proust proposes here is a means of reading his own text, and that of Faulkner as well. The “superior logic,” the “secret plan” is one which appears chaotic, random, fantastical, but which retrospectively reveals “a kind of order.”

This kind of retrospective recognition of order is precisely the way in which “chaos” scientists are forced to proceed. One of the features of fractal geometry is the unpredictability of the behavior exhibited in systems regulated by the simplest of equations. Given a minimal set of variables it remains impossible to determine *a priori* their values at any point in time. It is only retrospectively that a kind of order can be observed in what at first appeared to be absolutely random behavior. This also describes the work of the critic. Often the task is to discover the “hidden” patterns of meaning in the text, especially when this meaning seems to contradict the expressed meaning. This is what Paul De Man has done in his masterful demonstration of the metonymical functioning of the Proustian text, in spite of its expressed preference for metaphor over



metonymy. Such hidden meanings are often referred to as the text's "unconscious." The desire to study, the desire to thoroughly "cover" the works of Proust or Faulkner is finally the desire to suture a fragmented textual spectrum into a coherent, unified meaning. The desire to make sense betrays the senselessness of the mechanical production and repetition of text in the novels themselves. "Mechanical" here must be understood to imply arbitrary, contingent, reversible, meaningless, material, fragmentary and metonymic, as these terms are usually opposed to more privileged ones: motivated, necessary, meaningful, conscious, complete, and metaphorical. These two series of terms are summarized in the opposition of *nature*, to *artifice*.

The explorers of psychology, sociology, history, literature, philosophy and anthropology have all been strangely attracted to the same sorts of models. Again and again we can see the reappearance of the axes of combination and selection, metaphor and metonymy, synchrony and diachrony, condensation and displacement etc., which all seem to indicate similarity between the various fields of research. This same phenomenon has occurred in the "hard" sciences. The "fractal" nature of models of stock market and population fluctuations, cloud and star formation, liquid and gas flow patterns, and the branching patterns in plants and of veins and arteries in animals, all reveal a strange similarity among the seemingly chaotic behavior of natural systems. Katherine Hayles has forcefully argued that the similarities to be seen between scientific and humanistic disciplines is due to a shared epistemology, one which breaks with the historical valorization of order over disorder: "When a dichotomy as central to Western thought as order/ disorder is destabilized, it is no exaggeration to say that a major fault line has developed in the episteme" (16). Hayles is careful to speak of a fault line and not a complete break, for, as she acknowledges, the emphasis in scientific circles is on the presence of order in seemingly disorderly systems, while in literary theory and practice, it is the "cohabitation" of order with disorder, the fact that chaos is always already present within orderly systems, which is of most interest.

Order hidden in randomness seems to be the guiding principle of much modern literature, from Baudelaire's challenge to the readers of Les Fleurs du mal, to the chaotic narration of James Joyce's Finnegan's Wake and beyond. Proust explicitly acknowledged his debt to Baudelaire in Le temps retrouvé (TR 226).

This problem is even more complex than it at first may seem. Not only must the reader or literary critic deal with the texts themselves; increasingly they must also take into consideration the multitude of "satellite" texts, such as variants, commentaries, biographies, and other critical assessments. Whether it be a blessing or a curse, literary scholars now have the possibility of consulting the twenty-one volumes of Proust's personal and literary correspondence, in addition to the volumes upon volumes of studies, essays, analyses and exegeses of his work. As the corpus of studies and exegeses grows, our picture of the novelists and their creation is constantly changing.

It is also difficult to establish a definitive edition of the texts in question, in light of the unfinished nature of the works. Philip M. Weinstein points out that the very "object" which is the Faulknerian text is subject to questioning (97). In the case of Sartoris, which was published much against the author's wishes, as a pared down version of his original Flags in the Dust, the manuscript of which no longer exists, but which has been "reconstituted" from various typescript and manuscript fragments, this question must remain unresolved. In the case of Absalom and The Sound and the Fury, the addition of appendices, a chronology and a map to various versions again presents the problem of marginalia which can profoundly affect any reading of these novels.

Faulkner's recourse to time lines, appendices and cartography seems to be an attempt to harmonize the often incoherent narration. Quite often, however, these adjuncts contribute to the incoherence of the "world" they attempt to circumscribe: the chronology of Absalom, Absalom! for instance specifies that Judith and Charles E. St. V. Bon die of smallpox in 1884. Yet the text of the novel claims it was not smallpox, but yellow fever. Likewise, in the 1939 appendix to The Sound and the Fury, the Indian

Ikkemotubbe is said to have traded his people's land to Quentin Compson's great-great grandfather in exchange for "safe passage to Oklahoma" (in other words, a good horse, 407). This is said to have taken place in 1813. Yet in Absalom, written in 1936, Sutpen is said to have mysteriously acquired his land from Ikkemotubbe in 1833. Mr. Compson suggests that this was done in an underhanded manner: "until that Sunday when he came to church, if he had misused or injured anybody, it was only old Ikkemotubbe, from whom he got his land" (50). It is Mr Compson who is narrating this event to his son Quentin in 1909, so the possibility for subjective distortion could be argued to justify this inconsistency. The extent to which the information about Sutpen is unreliable can be inferred from the multiplicity of voices. Nearly all we know about the man is filtered through the second, third and sometimes fourth-hand narrations of Miss Rosa, Mr. Compson, Quentin and even Shreve. A large part of each of these narrators' stories are mere speculation. The appendix to Absalom, added by Faulkner several years after the original publication seems, by virtue of its very position to be an authoritative, supplementary gloss on the characters and events of the novel, added by the author in order to clear up the shady events of the novel. However, it contradicts the text on several points; it is thus an open question as to what extent the appendix is to be taken as authoritative.

Each of these works attempts, in dissimilar ways, to render whole a fragmented universe, while simultaneously calling attention to its own fragmentation. Faulkner employs, among other strategies, that of topography in the map of Yoknapatawpha county which he includes at the end of Absalom, Absalom!, to portray a totalizing vision of the "universe" in his novels. Yet the text of the novel itself is fragmentary and repetitive, there are huge gaps in our knowledge of the story, and most of what we do know is finally attributable only to conjecture. Cleanth Brooks has done an excellent job of demonstrating this in his appendix to William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country.

Most of the action in Proust's novel seems likewise to be restricted to a limited topography. Yet the wealth of inconsistencies and contradictions make it an impossible one. One example is the ever-changing itinerary of the little train at Balbec (SG), another is the uncertain or fluctuating location of Tante Léonie's home. Originally Proust wanted to place it near Chartres, East of Paris; when the novel expanded to include the war years Proust decided to move Combray to the West, to the Champagne region, where it would be occupied by the Germans and the church destroyed. Inconsistencies remain in the novel, and most critics assume that Proust would have tidied them up had he lived to see the publication of the final volumes, but such a task would have been monumental, and given Proust's tendency to continually embellish his text, he might never have finished, even if he had lived another decade. The sheer momentum of the text itself, with its periodic, serpentine sentences, seems to splice together the disparate parts of the narrative.

This incompleteness corresponds to the esthetics propounded by Proust's narrator, who admires the "great art" of the nineteenth century, those *unfinished* works whose unity is only recognized after the fact: "l'unité après coup des grands oeuvres du dix-neuvième siècle" (P 150; III: 157). It is only in the act of reading that the unity is produced. Unity and order are constructions formed by the viewer or reader of the work.

A phenomenon is manifest in the study of literature which seems to parallel what scientists know as the Butterfly effect, which postulates that small changes in initial conditions are capable of producing large effects. Scholars of Marcel Proust, as with any modern author, are obliged, not only to attend to the details of the Recherche, but also to take into account the author's earlier writings and correspondence along with the various manuscript versions of the novel. The novel remains unfinished—this in spite of Proust's writing the word "fin" after Le Temps retrouvé—because he never completed the revisions which were under way at the time of his death.

Thus, if only for purely practical purposes, there can be no definitive reading of a “text.” Indeed, the way in which one generation interprets a literary phenomenon may well say more about that generation than it does about the work concerned. This is why, as David Carroll puts it, the object of literary history “must also include the history of various theories used to analyze and explain [literature’s] form and sense.”<sup>76</sup> In other words the object of literary history includes literary history and criticism. It becomes virtually impossible to distinguish one from another, literature from the criticisms and exegeses which “situate” literature for us, and the literary object itself.

The problem of subjective perception as *represented* in the novels affects the reader’s interpretation by calling attention to and problematizing his perception of the text. It is the crucial function of the detail which gives its weight to all that which, though perhaps marginal, nevertheless provides a very real context for any particular reading. We as readers approach any given text with our knowledge of other texts, or sign-systems, including those of popular culture.<sup>3</sup> In a sense, and as Barthes implies in *S/Z*, we are an amalgam of all our reading experiences, and these we use to understand the Faulknerian or Proustian texts, which are themselves “intertexts,” with their own built-in references and allusions to other texts. The very terms text, context and writing must all be taken very broadly to include any manifestation of an instituted trace, including art, architecture, even tool. In this sense geography itself, the setting of these novels in Paris or Southern Mississippi is an intertextual reference to everything associated with these particular marks on the map, with these names.

A simple example is the last image of Caddy, given in the appendix to *The Sound and the Fury* “a photograph in color clipped obviously from a slick magazine—a picture filled with luxury, money and sunlight—a Cannebière backdrop of mountains and palms and cypresses and the sea, an open powerful expensive chromiumtrimmed sports

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<sup>76</sup> David Carroll, *The Subject in Question: The Languages of Theory and the Strategies of Fiction*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 9.

car, the woman's face hatless between a rich scarf and a seal coat, ageless and beautiful, cold serene and damned: beside her a handsome lean man of middleage in the ribbons and tabs of a German "staffgeneral" (415). Caddy's association with a Nazi officer, and the name "Cannebière" (the main street in the French port town of Marseille) all carry connotations reinforcing the idea of her decadence suggested also by the "luxury, money and sunlight," the sports car, the "rich scarf" and seal coat and the "cold" "damned" face. Her association with the enemy marks her as a traitor. The fact that she is last seen in Marseille, a port on the Mediterranean is also suggestive of a certain exoticism. Through the connotations of its constituents, this simple image of Caddy standing with the enemy is charged with symbolism.

#### Scaling effects

Writing involves making choices. A critic who undertakes a piece of criticism invariably chooses to concentrate on certain aspects, on certain sections of text, thus taking an intentionally myopic view of the whole when it comes time to generalize about authorial intention, textual meaning or even critical method. The nature of critical writing itself demands such general statements (if only in introducing concepts or concluding). What would be a critical text which consisted of nothing but details? It could be nothing more than a collection of extracted quotations from the object text with no commentary possible.

All critical assessments of the A la recherche du temps perdu must necessarily operate by means of an analysis in which a part (an excerpted section of the text) stands for a whole. Doubrovsky employs this strategy with the simple assertion that "Narrative micro-structures reproduce the global structure of the narrative" ["Les microstructures narratives reproduisent la structure globale du récit"].<sup>77</sup> Genette makes a similar move, but qualifies it by admitting that "Il va de soi qu'une analyse [au niveau du

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<sup>77</sup> Serge Doubrovsky. La place de la madeleine: Écriture et fantasme chez Proust, (Paris: Mercure de France, 1974) 33.

macrostructure] ne peut tenir compte des détails qui relèvent d'une autre échelle, et qu'elle procède donc d'une simplification des plus grossières" (85), "It goes almost without saying that an analysis [at the level of the macro-structure] cannot take into account details perceived at another scale, and that it is therefore based on a gross simplification." In spite of the admitted oversimplification, the metonymical relation of part to whole must then be demonstrated to metaphorically represent the whole. What is introduced as a contingent, arbitrary excerpt must be shown to necessarily and sufficiently justify the exclusion of the rest. This then allows the critic to enlarge his argument to include that whole. The passage from the specific to the general, from the partial to the holistic and from fiction to theory is equivalent to the passage from signifier to signified, from letter to spirit and from the mechanical, the automatic and the meaningless to the conscious, the intentional and the fullness of meaning. All of these oppositions are binary and hierarchical. The logic of our chosen texts is multiple and equivocal.

The crisis of western identity is thus one of a loss of a "master" context, the social, ideological and poetic master discourses which determine the kinds of narratives or pronouncements about identity and personality which are recognized as "truthful" or somehow "definitive." If there's one experience that characterizes modernity, it might well be the experience of the ever-changing contexts of everyday life.

One of these theories which has had a great deal of influence on critical approaches to these two texts is psychoanalysis. Indeed, it hardly seems possible to speak of identity, the self, consciousness or subjectivity without grappling with the enormous psychoanalytical apparatus attached to these terms. This would not be altogether inappropriate, not only because Faulkner expressed an overt admiration for Freud, but also because of the general familiarity of such theories to practically anyone writing since the turn of the century. It is no coincidence that Proust was writing his masterpiece at the same time that Freud was developing theories of the self which postulated a psyche split

into an “ego,” a “superego” and an “unconscious.” Research and speculation on psychological functioning had been going on all throughout the nineteenth century. Freud did not appear out of the blue. He built on the work of predecessors and contemporaries. Proust probably hadn’t read Freud, but that doesn’t mean he wasn’t privy to the kinds of speculations going on at that period. It is likewise doubtful that Faulkner really grasped Freudian theory, in spite of his expressed admiration for it. It is undeniable, however, that such ideas were “in the air.” Writers, artists, critics and scientists were speculating on these topics at the time Proust and Faulkner were writing. What is portrayed in the Recherche and in Absalom, Absalom! might be described as two forms of the “talking cure,” two attempts to articulate the mystery of personal identity, to bring to light the hidden motives and desires of characters, especially those of the narrators as they are revealed in the language and the structure of their narration. The link between Faulkner, Proust, and Freud is their concern with the structuring function of *language* in the very deepest recesses of memory and “consciousness.”

That which we call “personality” is dependent upon the impersonal system of language, even before we are born we are integrated into the linguistic economy when we are given a *name*. The naming process is the very movement of identification. This is as true in the hard sciences as it is in everyday life. It is part of a process which divides the world into small, assimilable, “identifiable” units. It is a way of separating, of cutting the substance of reality into manageable components. This is of course the first step in the Cartesian method. Another way of saying this is that subjects as well as objects are creations of language. But, as noted in the introduction to this dissertation, the naming process is potentially infinite.

In this respect, the weaving of many voices is an example a kind of intertextuality. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari provide a useful (and interesting) metaphor which might best describe the kind of “chaotic” process at work in these novels. In the language of Deleuze and Guattari, Marcel’s discovery could be said to



represent the resurgence of a circular, rhizomatic proliferation in the hierarchical branching structure of the (family) tree. A rhizome, they claim,

ne commence et n'aboutit pas, il est toujours au milieu, entre les choses, inter-être, *intermezzo*. L'arbre est filiation, mais le rhizome est alliance, uniquement d'alliance. L'arbre impose le verbe «être», mais le rhizome a pour tissu la conjonction «et . . . et . . . et . . . ».

neither begins nor ends, it is always in the middle, in between things, inter-being, *intermezzo*. The tree is heredity, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely by association. The tree imposes the verb "be," but the rhizome is formed with the conjunction "and . . . and . . . and" (36)

Ross Chambers has also identified this as the potential for diversion, mis-direction, or bifurcation inherent in traditional narrative. He calls it the "etc. principle." Texts that work "episodically" or which tend to be digressive, to indulge in long descriptions, work against the linear progression of traditional narrative, which attempts to drive inexorably toward closure.<sup>78</sup>

Roland Barthes recognizes this explicitly in Proust. He characterizes Proust's text as an infinitely explorable space or galaxy of signification

une des grandes cosmogonies que le vingtième siècle, principalement, a su produire [. . .] dont le caractère, à la fois statuaire et historique, est précisément celui-ci: qu'elles sont des espaces (des galaxies) infiniment explorables: ce qui déporte le travail critique loin de toute illusion de «resultat» vers la simple production d'une écriture supplémentaire, dont le texte tuteur [. . .] ne serait que le pré-texte.

one of the great cosmologies that the twentieth century, primarily, was able to produce [. . .] the statutory and historical character of whis is precisely this: that they are infinitely explorable spaces (galaxies), which displaces critical work far from any illusion of "results" to the simple production of a supplementary writing, for which the target text [. . .] would merely be the pre-text.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>78</sup> "The Etc. Principle." Lecture sponsored by the Department of French and Italian and the Center for French and Francophone Studies. Louisiana State University. Baton Rouge. 29 Mar. 1993. See also *Loiterature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

<sup>79</sup> "Une idée de recherche" in *Recherche de Proust*. (34 - 39). My translation.

Description has always been the “other” of narration. It is essential, yet it is an inertial factor resisting the forward momentum of plot. As Barthes noted in a speech given to the Collège de France in 1978: “chaque incident de la vie peut donner lieu ou à un commentaire [. . .] ou à une affubulation qui en donne ou en imagine l’avant et l’après narratif” (8), “each incident in life can give rise to a commentary [. . .] or to a fabrication which would give or imagine the narrative before and after.”<sup>80</sup>

Our perception of the texts we encounter as readers (and I include here that particular form of reading which is the writing of the critical text), can likewise be pursued along any number of paths, but the possibility of expansion inherent in the “opening up” of any of the details we encounter along the way implies an infinitely detailed network. Such a network of relations would be more than two dimensional. It would display all the characteristics of a *fractal* dimension. As in a fictional narration when the forward motion of the story’s *action* is slowed down to allow for a detailed description or an a chronological “filling in” of details, such procedures have the potential to allow for *infinite detail*.

### Recontextualization

Richard Rorty has made the case that the quest for truth should be considered as “recontextualization.” That is to say that the notion of “Truth” as an absolute should be discarded. History has shown that what one generation considers to be “Truth” the next has abandoned as myth or superstition. “The truth” is inevitably what people have come to agree upon as the truth. It is formed by consensus, and thus is subject to revision. Rorty, in urging us to think of human minds as self-reweaving webs of sentential attitudes, says that “To view beliefs as habits of action is to view the self from the outside [. . .]” (93). His point is that this outside is all we can pretend to know, yet it is not fixed once and for all: “As one moves along the spectrum from habit to inquiry—from instinctive revision of intentions through routine calculation toward revolutionary science

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<sup>80</sup> My translation.

or politics—the number of beliefs added to or subtracted from the web increases. At a certain point in this process it becomes useful to speak of ‘recontextualization.’ The more widespread the changes, the more use we have for the notion of ‘a new context’ ” (94) There is a very real sense in which these two novels are about this process even as they enact recontextualization in their very form, in their myriad “visions and revisions.”

This study has been an attempt to “recontextualize” the novels of these two authors, to draw a connection or establish a relationship between them in themes and techniques which signal a particular approach to the representation of consciousness, subjectivity, or personality. Identity is seen in Proust as an ongoing process of textual weaving. The infinite detail and complexity of this weaving is what these novels enact.

Paradoxically, the sheer volume of writing devoted to the same life-long project produced by these authors testifies at once to the inexhaustibility of such processes, and to the will to exhaust, or we might also say, to thoroughly “cover,” a subject. Their efforts bear witness more to the desire than to the possibility of such a totalization. There is a very real sense in which each of these novels is, as Roland Barthes might say, a tribute to the “infinite dilatory power” of the proper name. As a result, the worlds these texts “portray” remain irreducibly suggestive, plural and open to interpretation—in spite of the remarkable efforts at explication and summarization which are the perhaps inevitable endeavors of criticism or literary history as such.

Such efforts are inscribed within an ontological/epistemological project which is effectively undermined by the literary works concerned. Literary critics or historians who undertake to explicate, interpret, comprehend or elucidate the coherence of these textual universes run up against the same problems as the authors themselves. The text which thoroughly “exhausts,” which might completely “cover” the subjects of these works (again, both their *topos*, as well as the figure of the *narrating* subject portrayed in them: “Marcel” or “Je” and “Quentin Compson,” and we might just as well include the authorial figures Marcel Proust and William Faulkner) is non-existent, cannot exist as a

unified whole, not without distorting or betraying the irreducibly enigmatic nature of the works and of the human beings concerned.

The genius of these novelists may well consist in restoring to consciousness the complexity that realist fiction had often denied. Balzacian characters (for example) are often perceived as remaining true to the nature they are described as having from the very start of the novel. Human nature in such fiction is seen as immutable, following nearly inflexible laws of behavior. The error of Proust's hero, the one which he will spend much of the novel failing to learn—is the belief in the possibility of discovering such laws: The narrator describes himself as a young man in search of some great “abstract philosophical truth” to be the subject of a “great literary work” (S 176-77). His only real discovery is a law of chaos, of contradiction and vacillation. In this respect one of the work's original working titles, “Intermittences of the heart” (“Les intermittences du coeur”), is very telling. The intermittences he referred to are not merely the caprices which are normally associated with “affairs of the heart.” What Proust perhaps had in mind is more closely related to a specific physical affliction known today as heart “murmurs,” the unpredictable ways in which the heart fails to beat in a constant or regular rhythm. What the narrator has learned, by the time he takes up the pen to write, is that he must abandon the quest for essences, for the definitive work of art, one which would embody some great philosophical truth.

### Complexity is a Value

Proust's narrator expresses the need to restore to life the complexity which certain deterministic views of human behavior effectively masked: “nous sentons que la vie est un peu plus compliquée qu'on ne dit, et même les circonstances. Et il y a une nécessité pressante à montrer cette complexité” (TR 223). “We feel merely that life is a little more complicated than it is said to be, and circumstances too. And it is absolutely necessary that we should portray this complexity” (III: 956). Why did Proust feel that there was such a pressing need to show this complexity? His novel is a reaction to the

positivist attitude which sought to arrive at a simple, scientific explanation of human behavior. Literary theory may do well to look to metaphors and theories from other disciplines, such as the theories of fractal geometry. The recent growth of the internet and hypertext seem to confirm, or at least lend credence to much of post-structuralist thought about the web of intertextuality and intersubjectivity.

This desire for completion, for universality for *the final word* seems to drive or at least to have driven a great deal of literary historians and critics to write on these two authors. The present text participates in this desire in as far as its ambition is to connect Proust and Faulkner with scientific, philosophical and political theories and paradigms, to connect readings of textual “samples” to general statements and extrapolations about language, history and society based on those readings. It breaks with such a desire in its recognition of such generalizations as strategies or processes which allow for new understandings of these texts, rather than “methods” of arriving at definitive results. Criticism participates in the process by which texts are continually modified to signify on our terms. Indeed, such processes are themselves not unlike the mechanics of consciousness at work in Absalom, Absalom! or A la recherche du temps perdu.

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### **Vita**

The author is a native of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the son of Mr. Erwin A. LaRose and Madeline T. LaRose. The author obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree from Louisiana State University in 1988, with a major concentration in French, and a minor in English, and completed a Master of Arts degree in French at Louisiana State University in 1992. He lived and taught English in France, in the Lycée Emile Zola of Aix en Provence, during the 1990 - 1991 school year, and he also worked as an *assistant d'anglais* at the Université de Lettres in Angers (France), from 1993 to 1995. He was the recipient of an LSU Alumni Foundation Dissertation Fellowship in the 1996 - 1997 school year, and has taught French at Louisiana State University and Baton Rouge Community College.

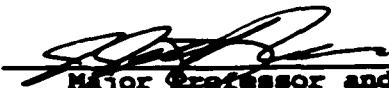
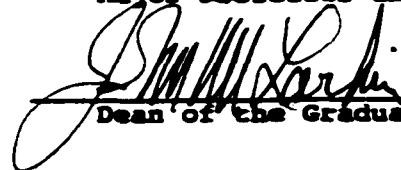
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**Candidate:** John Stephen LaRose


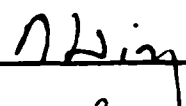
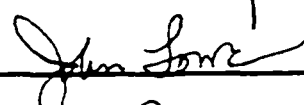

**Major Field:** French

**Title of Dissertation:** Memory, Time and Identity in the Novels of William Faulkner and Marcel Proust

**Approved:**

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Major Professor and Chairman  
  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dean of the Graduate School

## EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

  
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**Date of Examination:**

December 13, 1999

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